

AN
Unlikely
START-UP

LESSONS FROM THE LETTER
TO THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE

living
with...

living
for...

living
in...

Hopes, Dreams,
and Prayers

AN UNLIKELY START-UP

The Bay Area is a start-up culture. Entrepreneurs, innovators, and creatives have converged upon our locale, and start-ups have proliferated. Most will not make it. Some will. A few will become so successful that their names will become verbs in our vernacular (i.e. Google, Facebook, and Twitter). What do you need to start a successful start-up? The people that think about this stuff a lot say things like a good idea (not a brilliant idea, but something that could alter a current reality for the better), the right people (a salesperson, a technician/programmer, a leader/visionary), a product that customers want, enough money to make it go, and a commitment to not spend it too fast.

Yet, for all their energy, promise, and beauty, start-ups have downsides. Venture Capitalists want returns very quickly and runways are very short. Most start-ups in the Bay Area must succeed and then sell within two or three years to be considered a worthy return on investment. This spin-cycle does not often permit a start-up the opportunity to be built in order to last for the long haul--an opportunity to grow into a healthy and enduring organization.

It could be said that the early church was an "unlikely start-up." The "good idea" that every start-up needs was "good news" that God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13, 14). But the news was not readily received by Jewish people who held a rugged monotheism that had no category for *God become Man* or by Greek people who adopted a muted and stripped polytheism, replete with the din of many gods vying for supremacy. A God-Man laying claim to divine supremacy in a Jewish and Greek world was the self-issuance of a death warrant. And, it was!

Further, the "right people" that every start-up needs, were, in this unlikely start-up, well, not necessarily the right people. Zealots, Herodian corroborators, fishermen, women of "ill repute," and one prominent, well-educated Jew bent on squashing the Jesus movement. Yet, each one had an encounter with the Good News and it changed their life--turned them upside down and inside out, or in Saul's case, knocked him off his horse and landed him with a new name. Saul in the saddle became Paul on the ground, and his ministry bore both a humility and boldness that would be catalytic in the growth of this unlikely start-up.

It was Paul who would take this "product" (read *message*) into urban centers and cultural intersections, a "product" (read *message*) that the broader culture apparently did not want at first, but over time, would begin to embrace. With enough tent-making capital to get the project off the ground, this unlikely start-up began to grow and multiply, and today, 2000 years later, the church continues to expand and is even exploding in places like Africa, South America, and East Asia at unprecedented, historical rates.

Christ Church in Berkeley and Oakland is one such "franchise" (read *mission outpost*) of this unlikely start-up. Every Sunday we gather again to hear, taste, and see the Good News of God's rescue. Every Monday to Saturday, we become the unlikely people that take this unlikely message to our friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Every week 1 or 2 more are met with the relevance (or better, the *irrelevance*) of the Church and its Christ, and some will even begin to believe it and will have their lives turned upside down and inside out.

Every turn of the calendar year and with it, the turn toward Epiphany in the liturgical calendar, Christ Church revisits her Mission Statement, usually through one of the Epistles (*letters*) in the New Testament. This year is no exception as we venture into the world of the early church in Colossae, and listen in on Paul's words to a church that is, much like Christ Church, just getting off the ground--an unlikely start-up much that Paul hopes and prays will be built to last.

It is my hope that the culled quotes found below will provided our church with a helpful overview of the author, audience, context, and message of the book of Colossians as we use it to unpack our Mission Statement: "Christ Church exists to lead people into a deeper relationship with Christ and His Church, through Community for the City."

Sincerely,
Bart
January 2012

OVERVIEW

Colossians has...increasingly given me the impression of a letter to a church which, very young in the faith, needs to be strengthened, informed about what has actually happened to its members in their becoming Christians, taught how to pursue Christian maturity, and warned against a threat most dangerous for those only recently converted from paganism.

-N.T. Wright, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon.

Colossians, one of the shortest of Paul's letters, is also one of the most exciting. Writing to a young church discovering what it was like to believe in Jesus Christ and to follow him, Paul shares their sense of wonder as he encourages them to explore the treasures of the gospel and to order their lives accordingly.

-N.T. Wright, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon.

OUTLINE

After the initial greeting (1:1-2) comes Paul's great prayer of thanksgiving for the church at Colosse (1:3-8), which turns into intercession on their behalf (1:9-23). He prays, basically, that the young church may learn how to thank God for what he has done for them in Christ. Out of this there grows Paul's initial statement of his purpose in writing (1:24 - 2:5): the Christian maturity he has sought in prayer on the Colossians' behalf he is now working to produce by writing to them. With this the bud is opened fully, revealing the great central section of the letter, which itself unfolds in the same way. Paul begins with a pregnant pair of verses (2:6-7), whose basic command is to 'walk in Christ'; he then attacks certain teachings that would prevent the Colossians from doing this in the full, mature way he longs to see (2:8-19). Central to his appeal is the fact that Christians have already 'been buried and raised with Christ' (2:12), and this idea unfolds in turn (2:20 - 3:4) to give more detailed instructions. The double-edged appeal ('since you died with Christ ... since you have been raised with Christ ...', 2:20; 3:1) is finally amplified into the two paragraphs 3:5-11 and 3:12-17, concluding with the command (3:17) to do all things in the name of the Lord

Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him - which is, more or less, the sum and substance of the whole appeal. But Paul's picture of the life of the new age is not one of generalizations. He applies it in detail to two areas of life, the home (3:18 - 4:1) and the world (4:2-6). The body of the letter thus concludes where it began, with a picture of God at work, through the gospel, in the world (see 1:3-8). In the final section (4:7-18) Paul conveys greetings, from fellow-workers who are with him and to other churches in the neighbourhood of Colosse. This closing section serves as a reminder that we are dealing not simply with abstract truth but with a flesh-and-blood letter, which must be handled as such if it is to yield its secrets.

-N.T. Wright, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon.

THE CITY OF COLOSSAE

About 100 miles from Ephesus, in the valley of the River Lycus, near where it joins the Maeander, there once stood three important cities, Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colosse. Originally they had been Phrygian cities, but now they were part of the Roman province of Asia. They stood almost within sight of each other. Hierapolis and Laodicea stood on either side of the valley with the River Lycus flowing between, only six miles apart and in full view of each other; Colosse straddled the river twelve miles further up. The Lycus Valley had two remarkable characteristics. (1) It was notorious for earthquakes. The Greek geographer Strabo describes it by the curious adjective *euseistos*, which in English means good for earthquakes. More than once, Laodicea had been destroyed by an earthquake; but it was a city so rich and so independent that it had risen from the ruins without the financial help which the Roman government had offered. As the John who wrote the Revelation was to say of Laodicea, in its own eyes it was rich and had need of nothing (Revelation 3:17). (2) The waters of the River Lycus and of its tributaries were impregnated with chalk. This chalk accumulated, and all over the countryside the most amazing natural formations built up. The biblical scholar J. B. Lightfoot writes of that area: Ancient monuments are buried; fertile land is overlaid; river beds choked up and streams.

-William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.

The recipients of the letter were the members of a reasonably young church in Colosse, a town on the banks of the river Lycus in south-east Asia Minor (modern Turkey). It was neither a large nor an important town, though it had formerly been both; it had been upstaged by its near neighbours Laodicea, ten miles away, and Hierapolis, six miles beyond that. The letter indicates that Paul, who seems to have concentrated on major centres of population, had not visited the town himself: the Christian community there owed its origin under God to his fellow-worker Epaphras, who had brought news of Christ from Paul to Colosse and then news of a new church from Colosse to Paul (1:7-8).

-N.T. Wright, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon.

It remains a strange and wonderful fact that Paul wrote the letter, which contains the highest point in his thinking, to so unimportant a town as Colosse. But, in doing so, he halted a tendency which, had it been allowed to develop, would have wrecked Asian Christianity and might well have done irreparable damage to the faith of the whole Church.

-William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.

AUTHOR AND OCCASION

There is therefore no need to reject the Pauline authorship of Colossians, nor to imagine that its authenticity must be defended by the hypothesis that Paul wrote it when he was older, more settled and mellow, than he had been when writing Romans or Galatians. Indeed, that view hardly fits 2:6-23, or for that matter Philippians 3:2ff. Colossians can be seen as simply one more example of that vivid and brilliant theological writing which characterizes, uniquely, everything Paul himself wrote.

-N.T. Wright, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon.

I am therefore inclined to put Colossians (and its companion piece, Philemon) in the period between 52 and 55 (or possibly 53 and 56), while Paul was working in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10). It should be emphasized, however, that this, like all theories about the location of the captivity epistles, is simply a hypothesis...

-William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.

We must consider when and where the letter was written. The reference to imprisonment (4:3, which refers to the author's being 'in chains' - always assuming, as most do, that this is not to be taken metaphorically) has linked the letter not only with Philemon (see below, p. 191) and Ephesians (cf. Eph. 6:20), but also with Philippians, where literal imprisonment is brought into the explicit argument of the letter (Phil. 1:12-30). These four letters have therefore frequently been grouped together as 'letters from prison', and all four may well have been written from the same prison at about the same time. The strong ties of Colossians with Ephesians and Philemon support this, though Philippians does not so obviously bear, as one might say, the same *Opus* number. If we try to use these data in order to tie down at least Colossians and Philemon (we will discuss presently the problems raised by the special relationship between our letter and Ephesians), we find at least three possible periods of imprisonment: those in Ephesus (inferred from 2 Cor. 1:8; 1 Cor. 15:32), Caesarea (Acts 24:27) and Rome (Acts 28:16ff.). (That there were periods of imprisonment other than those recorded in Acts we know from the references in 2 Cor. 6:5 and 11:23.)

-N.T. Wright, The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon.

THE TEACHING OF THE LETTER

"I have suggested that in Colossians Paul is drawing upon his overall theological understanding to help his readers find that genuine human and spiritual maturity which God wills for his people. God has done what the law, and 'Wisdom', could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, to achieve reconciliation, he dealt with sin on the cross, so that the life which the law had sought to give, the true life of God's people, might be brought to expression in those who, through faith and baptism, belong to Jesus Christ. The church need look--must look--nowhere else for forgiveness for the past, for maturity in the present, or for future hope. Faced with a young church in a small town in up-country Asia Minor, Paul has written a letter in which he has distilled his understanding of some of the greatest themes in theology."

-N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

The main reason why the Colossians should give thanks to God is because of Jesus Christ; if they do this with full knowledge and understanding about who he is and what he has achieved, everything else will fall into place.

-N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

REFINING JUDAISM

Within the overall drift of the argument of the letter two features stand out: (a) the centrality of Christ throughout and (b) the emphasis, within chapter 2, on 2:11-12 and 2:13-15. The latter passages assert that the Colossian Christians have already been 'circumcised' and that God has dealt with the 'written code ... that was against us'. I believe that these features are best explained on the assumption that Paul is warning the reader not to be taken in by the claims of Judaism, which would try (as in Acts 15:5) to persuade pagan converts to Christianity that their present position was incomplete. On the contrary, Paul declares: In Christ you have already been 'circumcised', and have been set free from any claim that the Jewish law might make on you. No-one must therefore attempt to exclude you from the inner circle of God's people (2:16, 18, 20). The master-stroke in Paul's argument is thus that he warns ex-pagans against Judaism by portraying Judaism itself as if it were just another pagan religion. It is a 'philosophy' (2:8), developed by human tradition (2:8, 22): and to follow it is to return to the same type of religion the new converts had recently abandoned. A good deal of chapter 2 in particular can therefore be understood as characteristically Pauline irony (see the commentary for details).

-N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

If we thus place Colossians alongside Galatians and other passages in which Paul's polemic is aimed at Judaism, we see many clear parallels. But at the same time there are important differences. In Galatians Paul clearly faces a present and active opposing faction, and is seriously concerned lest his converts' faith be undermined. In Colossians his argument and tone suggest that the same is not true here. This has led at least one recent scholar to question whether there really were 'false teachers' in Colosse whose work and doctrine Paul was trying to undermine.' This suggestion finds additional support in, for instance, Paul's thanksgiving for the church and its faith (1:3-8), and particularly

in his comment in 2:5 that they are in good order and that their faith in Christ is firm. There is, in fact, nothing in the letter which requires us to postulate that Paul is opposing actual false teachers who were already infiltrating the church. The main emphasis of the letter is on Christian maturity. Paul knew well enough that his footsteps had been dogged, elsewhere in Asia Minor, by those offering a different sort of 'maturity', seeking to win over ex-pagan Christians to observance of the Jewish law. It is quite natural that he should issue such a warning in the course of his positive message, not merely because the danger might be pressing at some future point, but because it enabled him to highlight, by contrast, the fundamental fact that Christians are members, in Christ, of the true people of God, the true humanity. To suggest, then, that there are opponents actually present in Colosse (however fashionable such suggestions may be) may well be to read too much between the lines. This does not mean, of course, that Paul's readers would have had difficulty in understanding what he was talking about. The fact of a large Jewish minority presence in the cities and towns of Asia Minor at this period would have meant that thoughtful ex-pagans would be quite capable of recognizing the target of Paul's polemic, even if they did not at once see all its subtleties.

-N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

Paul's critique of Judaism does not aim, as in the old caricature, at 'legalism', the supposed attempt to earn righteousness through good works. It aims at the position of national superiority which Judaism had thought to claim on the basis of God's choice of her. Observance of the Law, the national charter, was designed not to earn membership in the covenant but to embody and express it. For Paul, the gospel of the crucified and risen Messiah reveals that God has all along had a different end in view. National Israel, with her Law, was simply the preliminary stage in this plan, which always envisaged an eventual world-wide family.

-N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

ATTACKING GNOSTICISM

Was there, then, any general heretical tendency of thought which would include all this? There was what was called Gnosticism. Gnosticism began with two basic assumptions about matter. First, it believed that spirit alone was good and that matter was essentially evil. Second, it believed that matter was eternal; and that the universe was created not out of nothing, which is orthodox belief, but out of this flawed matter. Now this basic belief had certain inevitable consequences:

(1) It had an effect on the doctrine of creation. If God was spirit, then he was altogether good and could not possibly work with this evil matter. Therefore God was not the creator of the world. He put out a series of emanations, each of which was a little more distant from God, until at the end of the series there was an emanation so distant that it could handle matter; and it was this emanation which created the world. The Gnostics went further. Since each emanation was more distant from God, it was also more ignorant of him. As the series went on, that ignorance turned to hostility. So the emanations most distant from God were both ignorant of him and hostile to him. It followed that he who created the world was both completely ignorant of, and at the same time utterly hostile to, the true God. It was to meet that Gnostic doctrine of creation that Paul insisted that the agent of God in creation was not some ignorant and hostile power, but the Son who perfectly knew and loved the Father.

(2) It had an effect on the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ. If matter was altogether evil, and if Jesus was the Son of God, then Jesus could not have had a flesh-and-blood body, so the Gnostics argued. Jesus must have been a kind of spiritual phantom. So the Gnostic stories say that when Jesus walked, he left no footprints on the ground. This, of course, completely removed Jesus from humanity and made it impossible for him to be the Saviour of human beings. It was to meet this Gnostic doctrine that Paul insisted on the flesh-and-blood body of Jesus and insisted that Jesus saved men and women in the body of his flesh.

(3) It had an effect on the ethical approach to life. If matter was evil, then it followed that our bodies were evil. If our bodies were evil, one of two consequences followed. (a) We must starve and beat and deny the body; we must practise a rigid regime of self-denial in which the body was suppressed, and in which every physical need and desire was refused. (b) It was possible to take precisely the opposite point of view. If the body was evil, it did not matter what was done with it; spirit was all that mattered. Therefore people could satisfy the body's desires to the full, and it would make no difference. Gnosticism could, therefore, result in self-denial, with all kinds of laws and restrictions; or it could result in a rejection of the moral law, in which any immorality was justified. And we can see precisely both these tendencies at work in the false teachers at Colosse.

One thing followed from all this: Gnosticism was a highly intellectual way of life and thought. There was this long series of emanations between human beings and God; people must fight their way up a long ladder to get to God. In order to do that, they would need all kinds of secret knowledge and private learning and hidden passwords. If they were to practise the self-denial of a rigid asceticism, they would need to know the rules; and so rigid would the asceticism be that it would be impossible for them to embark on the ordinary activities of life. The Gnostics were, therefore, quite clear that the higher levels of religion were open only to the chosen few. This conviction of the necessity of belonging to an intellectual religious aristocracy precisely suits the situation at Colosse.

-William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*.

CONCLUSION

But Christian truth is a corporate possession. The church is the context within which we should expect to have wrong ideas gently corrected and right ones gently suggested, and where we in turn may contribute to the same activities. This will mean active membership in a local church and perhaps a variety of Christian groups; it should also involve careful listening to Christians of other backgrounds and periods of history. To set biblical interpretation within the context of the church, however, makes sense only if we hold a clear belief in the Spirit who enables the church to be the church. To hear Paul's words as if addressed to ourselves, we must understand ourselves both as parts of the same Spirit-filled community that he was addressing and as being ourselves indwelt by the Spirit who enabled Paul to write what he did.

-N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

WORKS EXPLORED

William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*.

F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*.

James Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

Ben Witherington, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians*.

N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*.