

## **The History of Colossae**

Colossae was an inland city located in Asia Minor – now east central Turkey. It was located on the Lycus River at the junction of two lesser streams. It was located about 100 miles east of Ephesus and was one of three cities in the Lycus River valley, Laodicea and Hierapolis (now called Pamukkale). Colossae was the smallest of the three cities. Paul, in his letter to Colossae, makes mention of both Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Colossae was a major commercial center but lost its influence by the first century. To make matters worse, the road from Sardis to Pergamum was rerouted around Colossae leading to its further downsizing. Later the city was moved to a new location called Khonae (now Honez). This misfortune happened sometimes after Paul wrote his letter to them. Colossae also has the distinction of being the smallest center to receive one of Paul's letters.

In 200 BC, the area received an influx of Jews when the Persian king, Antiochus III, transported 2000 Jewish families into the region from Babylon and Mesopotamia. Many other Jews from Palestine also joined them. At this time, there were probably around 50,000 Jews in Colossae and the surrounding area. Add to the Jews the mix of native Phrygians, settlers from Syria and Greece. This led to a multitude of various religions with their temples. There were enough Jews in the city to have a synagogue.

### **Introduction to Colossian Church**

It is not known for certain who founded the Colossian Church. However, most Bible scholars and Theologians believe that it was established by Epaphras, a citizen of Colossae, as a result of his meeting Paul in Ephesus in AD 57 during Paul's third missionary journey when, it was said that "*All the residents of Asia heard the word of God*" (Acts 19:10). Epaphras was a convert and became one of Paul's co-workers. After he return to his home in Colossae, he started the congregation there. Some of the notable people that lived in Colossae at this time, in addition to Epaphras, were Philemon and his slave, Onesimus, Apphia, Archippus. It is thought that the church probably met in Philemon's house, who was evidently well-to-do from the fact he was a slave owner. Archippus was possibly the leader of the church at Laodicea. It is known that Philemon was a

convert of Paul. The church consisted mostly of Gentile converts with a scattering of Jews.

Paul's letter to the Colossians was probably written from Rome between AD 60-62. He was imprisoned at this time and also wrote letters to the Ephesians and Philippians during this period. Paul wrote the letter after Epaphus visited him in prison and relay what was happening in Colossae. The gospel was growing and bearing fruit, but false teaching was being introduced by outsiders insisting that other religious laws had a place in the church. Paul tells them that the supremacy of Christ and the completeness of His church over-rides the what the false teachers were preaching.

Describing the exact nature of the 'Colossian Heresy' is one of the great problems of NT scholarship. The church knew what Paul was talking about, but we do not to the same extent. We only have Paul's answer, not a description of the problem. What is clear, is that the Colossians were mixing Christianity with other religious thought and philosophies (2:8). So the basic problem seems to be syncretism, a blurring and perversion of the gospel, which Paul warns against.

The letter to Colossae addresses a series of questions which are particularly relevant to today's world. This include: Is Christ the only true Savior? Are the mystical claims and 'revelations' of other religions valid? Is Christ the only way to find truth, or just one of many ways? How can we find the fullness of religious experience? These questions were being asked in Colossae in the 60's AD, but also in modern society with rise of the New Age movement, with a great and growing interest in astrology and eastern mysticism.

In Colossae, as today, there was a market place of religious ideas, from which people pick and choose what they like, regardless of whether these ideas fit together into a logical framework. In this way of thinking, there is no room for any claim to exclusive revelation, such as Jesus claiming to be the only way to God.

The basic concern of Hellenistic thought was asking how man could escape from the lower, evil, earthly realm and reach the heavenly, spiritual realm. They believed that this was achieved through ecstatic experiences. Mystery cults, involving strict discipline in initiations into secret rites promised freedom from the evil body, enlightenment and union with the god or goddess of the cult.

Syncretistic teaching, an amalgam of various religions was a characteristic of Greek and Roman times, where newer and older religions and religions from

different areas were combined. When Christianity was introduced into the area, it also was incorporated into the local religious scene. It was just another cult to be combined into the mixture which already existed. Phrygia, which contained a mixture of cultures and peoples, was a sure centre for syncretism.

The Hellenistic and mystery religions called themselves 'philosophies', hence Paul's warnings (2:8). The temptation was for Christians to come under the power of other heavenly intermediaries, and to go beyond Christ through knowledge from visions.

In apocalyptic literature and the writings of Philo, fasting was used as a preparation for visionary experiences. Part of the vision would be participation in the heavenly worship by angels, and being filled with the fullness of the deity being worshipped.

The false teaching probably contained an early form of gnosticism. It was not fully developed gnosticism, which did not rise until the early second century, but was more of a syncretism of non-conformist Jewish elements from apocalyptic Judaism with speculative Hellenistic ideas.

Paul was concerned for the truth and integrity of the gospel. He took their language and terminology and filled it with his own content. He also the slogans and catch-words used by the false teachers. These are some of the characteristic words that Paul uses: fullness (pleroma), knowledge (gnosis), and elemental spirits (stoicheia).

From the letter we can detect the following aspects of the false teaching: They were claiming they could provide Spiritual 'fullness'. The new teachers were arriving in the Colossian church, claiming that they would complete and perfect the simple and elementary faith which Paul had introduced to Colossae. Paul's response was to say, that "In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (1:19), "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (2:9), and "You have come to fullness in him" (2:10).

The teachers were offering spiritual freedom or deliverance through their teaching, so Paul reminds them of their freedom in Christ (1:13, 2:15). They claimed special insight into the powers of evil, and ability to give the believers special protection from them, so Paul declares that Christ is the head of every ruler and authority (2:10), that He disarmed the rulers and authorities (2:15), and warn against the

dangers of following the elemental spirits of the universe (2:8,20). In response to their demands for asceticism and fasting, Paul argues against self-abasement and worship of angels (2:18), and warns against extreme asceticism (2:16,20-21,23). They were offering further secret initiation into a deeper 'knowledge' of God and experience of his power, so Paul prays that they will be filled with the knowledge of God (2:9). They were claiming superiority over ordinary believers, so Paul says, "Do not let anyone condemn you ..." (2:16), and "Do not let anyone disqualify you" (2:18). Because they were causing divisions in the church, Paul appeals for unity (2:1-5, 3:11). There also seems to be a strong Jewish element, including observing the law, circumcision, food regulations, observing the sabbath and new moon celebrations (2:11,14,16,20-22).