

# Editorial: The Glory of Christ in Colossians

*Stephen J. Wellum*

It is our privilege to devote this issue of *SBJT* to Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison for the sake of the gospel (see Col 4:3, 10, 18), hence its categorization as one of Paul's captivity letters alongside Philipians, Ephesians, and Philemon. For many reasons, throughout the ages, this letter has served the church well. Probably the most significant reason is due to its great and glorious subject matter: the Lord Jesus Christ. From the

incredible Christological text or hymn of Colossians 1:15-20, and in every subsequent chapter, the person and work of God's own dear Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is unpacked and unveiled before our eyes. Colossians, like no other Pauline letter, from beginning to end, presents the glory, supremacy, preeminence, and sufficiency of Jesus, the incarnate Son, as Lord of creation, redemption, the church, and every prin-

cipality and power, not only in this age but also in the age to come (see Col 1:15-20; 2:8-15).

Why should we pay careful attention to this letter today? First and broadly considered, we do so because Colossians is Scripture. Given that *all* Scripture is God-breathed and thus *God's* Word (2 Tim 3:16-17), it is imperative that we study, meditate upon, and obey this letter. Yet more specifically, there is a second reason why a study of Colossians will pay important dividends for the church today. Even though nearly 2,000 years separate us from the Colossian church, the challenges she faced and Paul's message to her is precisely what we need today given that we face similar difficulties. Let me develop this last observation a bit more.

To any astute observer of the contemporary scene, at least in the West but not limited to the western world, most acknowledge that the church is facing challenging times. Living in an increasingly pluralistic and postmodern society where truth and morality are up for grabs, the church is facing incredible pressure to com-

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promise in a whole host of areas including the theological and practical. However, for the most part, the kind of compromise we face is not an outright rejection of the truth of the gospel but a temptation to mix or blend biblical, orthodox Christianity with the current *Zeitgeist*, that is, the thought, mindset, and “spirit of the time.” The result is a syncretism—in doctrine and practice—which attempts to extract truths from the Bible, divorced from the entire framework and context of Scripture, and then attempts to mix these truths with alien, contradictory viewpoints so that the end result is a compromised gospel and a muting of the Word of truth.

Where shall we turn to receive help to resist such compromise? How do we avoid becoming syncretistic in our thinking and thus unfaithful to the gospel in our day? It is important to remember that we are not the first ones to face such challenges. We often forget how similar the 1<sup>st</sup> century is to our 21<sup>st</sup> century context, at least in this regard. Specifically, this is true for the Colossian church. This church, founded by Epaphras and situated in the Lycus Valley, knew what it was like to live in a pluralistic and relativistic age. The Roman Empire harbored every ideology and religion imaginable, united in ultimate allegiance to the Roman Emperor. In such a situation, this church not only knew the pressure to compromise and the pull of syncretism but she had also experienced false teachers in her midst. From the letter, we know that Epaphras had visited Paul while he was in prison in Rome and informed him of the state of the church. Even though much of the report was encouraging (1:8; 2:5), he also reported the rise of false teaching within the church, which if not countered, would undermine the gospel and return the people to spiritual bondage and darkness. In fact, it is to counter such false, aberrant teaching that Paul’s letter was probably written.

Scholars have debated the exact nature of “the Colossian heresy.” Since Paul does not spell it out in detail, we do not know the precise nature of it.

Yet, it is probably best to view it as a conglomeration of Jewish and Hellenistic beliefs mixed together with gospel truth. From the letter we know it focused on a false spirituality which fixated on areas of “wisdom and knowledge” (2:3), possibly even the demonic (2:8, 20), including Jewish tradition, rituals, foods, circumcision, the Sabbath, and other holy days (2:11-23). Regardless of what it exactly was, at its heart, as with all heresy, it had the primary effect of diminishing the supremacy and glory of Christ, and secondarily, robbing the church of her sufficiency and security in Christ.

What does Paul say to those who are in danger of compromise? What is his antidote to heresy, whether in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is this: the glory, wonder, and supremacy of Christ’s person and work. In Colossians Paul reminds these early Christians, as he reminds us, of who the Son is as the “image of the invisible God,” the agent of creation (1:15-16), who even as the incarnate one continually upholds and sustain the universe (1:17). Even more: Paul reminds us that Christ is not only Lord over all creation but he is also Lord in redemption, and that those who in in faith-union with him are now complete and sufficient in him. Nothing needs to be added to his work; he has done it all. In Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, all the blessings of heaven are ours—now and for all eternity.

As the church desperately needed to hear this message long ago, today we need to hear it again. In any age, we are always in the danger of compromise. Especially in our day when the pressure of syncretism is great, the antidote to it is the glory and supremacy of Christ. It is my prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will not only lead us to a greater knowledge of his Word but it will also lead us to a greater knowledge, confidence, and love for Christ Jesus our Lord. Let us learn from Colossians how to think deeply, find our rest in, and be led to worship, love, and praise of our great Triune God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.