IN CHRIST, IN FLAGSTAFF

Introduction & Colossians 1:1-2

By

Steven J. Cole

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In Christ, In Flagstaff
Introduction & Colossians 1:1-2

Garrison Keillor has made a career out of his monologues about the fictitious Minnesota town, Lake Wobegon, “the little town that time forgot and the decades can’t improve.” It’s the town “where all of the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the children are above average.” He says that in Lake Wobegon, people lock their cars in the summer, not because they’re afraid of theft, but because they’re afraid that someone will throw a lot of unwanted zucchini from their garden into the car.

Over the years, I’ve read a few other characteristics of small towns: “It’s a small town when you don’t have to use your turn signal, because everyone knows where you’re going.” “It’s a small town when you can’t walk for exercise because every driver offers you a ride.” “It’s a small town when people know the news before the paper comes out, but they take the paper anyway to see whether the editor got the stories right.” Well, we can’t rightly call Flagstaff a small town any more, since we’ve grown to about 75,000. But we’re surrounded by small towns, such as Seligman, Ash Fork, Winslow, and Tuba City.

I mention small towns because Colossae was a small town, about 100 miles east of Ephesus in western Asia Minor (modern Turkey). It was about 10 miles from Laodicea and 13 miles from Hierapolis. Colossae had once been a fairly important town, but the trade route had shifted to go through Laodicea so that by Paul’s day, its importance had dwindled. The population was mostly Gentile, but a sizeable Jewish population had settled there several centuries before (Douglas Moo, The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 27). Bishop Lightfoot (Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon [Zondervan], p. 16) wrote, “Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed.” It would be as if in our day Paul wrote an inspired letter to the church in Seligman.

So you have to ask, “Why would Paul write to this relatively insignificant church?” The answer is that this small town church
had some big time doctrinal threats to its well-being. We can be thankful for this problem, because it prompted Paul to write this wonderful little letter that sets forth the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ more forcefully than in any of his other letters.

Paul had not yet visited Colossae personally (Col. 2:1). The church there had been planted by Epaphras, a native (Col. 1:7; 4:12), who was probably converted and discipled during Paul’s extended stay in Ephesus (Acts. 19:10). Epaphras also probably planted churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13). The church in Colossae met in the home of Philemon (Philem. 2), whose runaway slave, Onesimus, had met Paul and Christ during Paul’s Roman imprisonment. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, urging him to forgive and welcome back his runaway slave as a brother in Christ.

But the church in Colossae was being plagued by false teaching, and Epaphras was not sure how to deal with it. So he went to Rome and found Paul, who was under house arrest in his own quarters (Acts. 28:30-31). In response, Paul wrote Colossians and then probably expanded it into the letter to the Ephesians. Both epistles are similar in structure and content, but in Colossians the emphasis is on Christ as the head of the church, whereas in Ephesians it’s on the church as the body of Christ, the head. Colossians is much more focused in attacking the false doctrine that was infiltrating that church, whereas Ephesians is more general.

Some scholars think that Ephesians may have been a circular letter, intended for several churches in Asia Minor. If so, it could be the letter coming from Laodicea that Paul mentions in Colossians 4:16. If not, then the letter to Laodicea is a lost letter, which in God’s sovereignty was not intended to be included in the New Testament. At the same time, Paul also wrote the short letter to Philemon and probably sent all three letters back with Tychicus (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7), while Epaphras stayed with him in Rome.

It’s not easy to figure out the exact nature of the false teaching in Colossae. In the past two centuries commentators have suggested at least 44 different views (Peter O’Brien, Word Biblical Commentary, Colossians-Philemon [Zondervan], p. xxxi)! We have to piece together the elements of the false teaching by looking at various emphases in the letter, much like listening to one side of a phone con-
versation. Probably, like most false teaching, it was a blend of several errors.

There was a strong Jewish ascetic element (asceticism is the belief that holiness comes by denying yourself certain basic needs and comforts), which emphasized circumcision, dietary and ceremonial laws, and the observance of holy days as the way to victory over the flesh (Col. 2:11, 14, 16, 18, 20-23). So it was legalistic, emphasizing rule-keeping as the way to be holy.

Also, the false teachers promised their followers deeper wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:8). Paul counters this by saying that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). The false teachers may have promised that people would experience “fullness” through their insights. Paul counters this by asserting that all the fullness of deity dwells in Christ in bodily form (Col. 1:19; 2:9) and that “in Him, you have been made complete” (Col. 2:10). You don’t need to add anything else.

The false teachers also over-emphasized the role of angels. The Bible teaches the existence and importance of angels (Heb. 1:14), but the false teachers were teaching that we should worship angels, based on visions that they claimed to have seen (Col. 2:18). Paul counters this by showing that Jesus Christ created all angelic beings for His purpose and glory (Col. 1:16) and He is over them all, including the fallen angels (Col. 2:10, 15). Thus we should worship Him, not angels.

Thus, like most false teaching, the Colossian heretics mixed a number of false teachings that they had taken from different religious, philosophical, and cultural views. Douglas Moo concludes (ibid., p. 59):

The false teachers were probably people from within the Colossian Christian community who were bragging about their ability to find ultimate spiritual “fulfillment” via their own program of visions and asceticism. This program was drawn partly from Judaism, particularly in its focus on rules about eating and observing certain days. They were preoccupied with spiritual beings, probably because they viewed them as powerful figures capable of having a significant influence on their lives.
He adds (p. 60), “The false teachers were appealing to spiritual beings, visions, and rules to find security in this very uncertain universe. In doing so, they were questioning the sufficiency of Christ.” So Paul’s corrective was to proclaim the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all (Col. 1:18) and His sufficiency for all (Col. 3:11).

We can divide the book into two broad sections, the polemical (chapters 1 & 2), where Paul argues against the false teaching by exalting Christ alone as preeminent; and, the practical (chapters 3 & 4), where he shows how Christ’s preeminence should affect us and our relationships. Chapter 4 contains a relatively lengthy personal section, probably because Paul didn’t know most of the people receiving this letter and he wanted to couch his corrective teaching in this personal framework.

With that as an overview, I want to make three observations before we look at the first two verses. First, Paul did not write Colossians as a theological treatise to be analyzed by scholars, but as a pastoral letter to be read and understood by common, small town people who were relatively young in their Christian faith. The most mature of these people were probably no more than five years old in the Lord! Since they were mostly Gentile (Col. 1:21, 27; 2:13; 3:5-7), they weren’t coming from a biblical background.

If the Holy Spirit directed Paul to write these profound truths about Jesus Christ to these original readers, many of whom probably couldn’t even read, but had to listen to the letter as it was read, then it’s not too deep for us to grasp if we depend on the Spirit to teach us. Many modern American Christians, if they read at all, stick to pretty shallow self-help books or sensational testimonies, but avoid wrestling with meaty theological books. I encourage you to go deeper! You can do it!

Second, right theology is the basis for right living. We tend to avoid theology because we find it either too difficult or just plain boring. If a preacher starts talking about theology, our eyes glaze over and we tune out. We want him to skip the theology and get to the practical stuff. We prefer amusing anecdotes and heart-warming stories. But Paul wanted these small town folks to know that what we believe about Jesus Christ is not irrelevant to life. Rather, it’s absolutely crucial. It affects our morals (Col. 3:5-9) and our relationships in the church, in our homes, in our jobs, and with those in
the world (Col. 3:12-4:6). False teaching never leads to true godli-
ness (Col. 2:23).

Third, the test of solid theology can be summed up by answering the ques-
tion, “Where does it put Jesus Christ?” Does He merely have a place in
it, or does He occupy the central and supreme place? Is He pre-
sented as fully God and fully man in one person, or has either side
of that truth been slighted? Is His sacrificial death on the cross pre-
sented as sufficient for life and godliness, or do we need to add the
latest insights from the world to deal with our problems?

Years ago, I was wrestling with whether to allow some small
groups in our church in California to use some books that blended
psychology and Christianity. These books, The Twelve Steps for Chris-
tians, which claims on the cover to be “based on biblical teachings,”
and When Your World Makes No Sense [Oliver Nelson], by Dr. Henry
Cloud (republished as Changes That Heal), purport to help emotion-
ally hurting people with insights that traditional biblical teaching
lacks (Cloud, pp. 16-17).

I had a nagging uneasiness with these books that I couldn’t
identify until I read the chapter in J. C. Ryle’s Holiness [James Clarke
& Co.], “Christ is All,” and, about the same time, John MacAr-
thur’s Our Sufficiency in Christ [Word]. Both of these sources helped
me see that the flood of books that blend psychology and Christi-
nity assume that Christ is not sufficient for our emotional and
relational problems. They do not direct us to His supremacy and
sufficiency for life and godliness. Rather, much like the Colossian
false teaching, they blend worldly philosophies with Bible verses
often taken out of context, to give the appearance of wisdom (Col.
2:23), but they don’t exalt Christ as Lord. They don’t lead the read-
ers to exclaim with the psalmist (Ps. 73:25-26):

\[
\text{Whom have I in heaven but You?} \\
\text{And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.} \\
\text{My flesh and my heart may fail,} \\
\text{But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.}
\]

So, the test of solid theology is that it exalts Christ as supreme
and sufficient for all who believe in Him. Now I want to focus on
Colossians 1:1-2, where Paul shows us that …
God has equipped His church in Christ so that we might be His church in Flagstaff.

My two points come from two parallel phrases in the Greek text of verse 2, “in Colossae” and “in Christ.” I’m taking the liberty of replacing “in Colossae” with “in Flagstaff.” When we see how God has equipped us in Christ, then we can be what He wants us to be as His church in Flagstaff.

1. **God has equipped His church in Christ.**

We see three ways God has equipped His church in Christ:

A. God has given apostles to His church.

Colossians 1:1: “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God … .” A postle means “sent one,” and is used in two ways in the New Testament. Sometimes it refers to a messenger sent out by the church for a special task (2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25; Rom. 16:7). But it is mainly used of the twelve plus Paul, probably James, the Lord’s brother, and perhaps Barnabas (1 Cor. 9:5-6; 15:7; Acts 14:4, 14; Gal. 1:19). These men had seen the risen Lord (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:1); they had unique authority to perform miracles (2 Cor. 12:12); and they were directly appointed by Christ (Mark 3:14; Acts 9:15; Gal. 1:1), who gave them authority to found the New Testament church (Eph. 2:20; 1 Thess. 2:6; 1 Cor. 12:28-29).

As such, the office passed away with John’s death at the end of the first century. There is no biblical warrant for the Roman Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession. We have the foundational, authoritative apostolic teaching in the New Testament.

Paul was not an apostle because he took an aptitude test and decided that this would be a good career fit. Rather, He was an apostle “by the will of God.” God had sovereignly laid His hand on Paul to save him and to conscript this formerly zealous Jew as His apostle to the Gentiles. Although there are no true apostles today, if you know Christ it’s by the will of God. And the Holy Spirit sovereignly distributes various spiritual gifts to all whom He saves (1 Cor. 12:11). The point is, serving Him is not optional for believers. It’s mandatory. You’re a conscript, not a volunteer!

B. God has set apart believers into a family in Christ.
Note the family terms that Paul uses here. Timothy was not an apostle because he had not seen the risen Lord. But he was "the brother." Paul refers to the church as brethren and God is our common Father. (After "Father," the KJV adds, "and the Lord Jesus Christ," but the earliest and best manuscripts lack the phrase.)

God becomes your Father through the new birth, when He gives you new life and you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. You share this new life in Christ in common with all who have been born again. You begin a relationship with God as your Heavenly Father and with all of your brothers and sisters in Christ. It's always wonderful when you meet a fellow believer who may be from a different country, but there's an instant bond in Christ that makes you feel closer to this brother in Christ than you feel to natural family members who don't know Christ.

Families, by their very nature, are set off from the rest of the world. You can crash a party, but you can't crash a family. You join a family only by birth, adoption, or marriage. If you haven't come in through one of those ways, you're an outsider and don't belong. In the same way, God's family, the church, is set apart from the world. We are to be distinct from the world because we share new life in Jesus Christ.

Paul underscores our distinction from the world by calling us "saints." Some versions translate it as "holy," which is the meaning of "saints." The Roman Catholic Church sets apart some especially noteworthy Christians as saints, but the Bible refers to all believers as saints or holy ones. It means that we are set apart from the world for the Lord. We are a people for His possession (1 Pet. 2:9).

Paul also refers to the Colossians as "faithful brethren." Some commentators say that it should be translated "believing brethren," but that's a tautology. All true believers are brethren and vice versa. Since this is the only place in Paul's letter greetings that he uses this phrase, he may be referring to those who had remained true to the faith and had not been carried away by the false teachers. The enemy continually stirs up false teaching to try to deceive the saints (Eph. 4:14). That's why you need to be doctrinally grounded so that you can remain faithful when the winds of false doctrine try to blow you off course.
But also, our distinctiveness as God’s family is seen in Paul’s favorite phrase, “in Christ.” Formerly, born into this world as sinners, we were “in Adam.” Now, born into God’s family we are “in Christ,” the new man. This refers to our secure position before God where He views us just as He views His Son. In Him, we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:14). In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). In Christ, we have been made complete (Col. 2:10). As Paul sums it up in Ephesians 1:3, in Christ God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. We inherit everything we need for life and godliness in Christ, and you’re in Christ if you’re a member of God’s family through faith in Christ.

If you put a message into a bottle and secure it with a cork, that message will be protected because it’s in the bottle. It may get battered around by the waves, but it won’t sink and be destroyed because it’s in the bottle. In the same way, if you’re in Christ, you are protected from the evil forces of this world that seek to destroy you. You are secure in Him, because He is at the right hand of the Father, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Eph. 1:21). That’s ultimate security!

Thus God has equipped us by giving us His Word through the apostles and by setting us apart in His family in Christ. Also,

C. God relates to us in grace and in peace.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father” is a form of greeting, but it is more than just an empty phrase. It’s a prayer that we as God’s people would experience the riches of His grace and peace. God’s grace is His unmerited favor toward us in Christ. It means that He does not deal with us according to our sins. We are accepted in His presence, not because of our performance, but because “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). God’s grace is a motivating, liberating power that gives victory over sin and the desire to draw near to our loving Father.

God’s peace comes from the Hebrew “shalom,” and refers to total well-being, both inward and outward. Through Christ, we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). He Himself is the basis of our peace with one another (Eph. 2:14). Because our God is both sov-
ereign and loving, we can have inward peace even in trials, knowing that He is working them together for our good (Rom. 8:28).

So this short opening greeting shows us how God has equipped us to be His church in Christ. But He hasn’t saved us to live for ourselves. Thus ...

2. God has equipped us to be His church in Flagstaff.

These saints were in Christ, but they were also in the pagan city of Colossae, just as we are in pagan Flagstaff. God puts us in Christ, but He doesn’t want us to join monasteries to live apart from this world. As Jesus prays (John 17:15-18),

“I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.”

Even though Colossae was a small, insignificant town, God placed His people there to proclaim the good news of Christ to all who would hear. And He has placed us in this city to be both “in Christ,” but also “in Flagstaff.” Flagstaff claims to be the world’s first “dark sky” city, which is great for looking at the stars. But it’s also a just plain dark city! We His people are His light in this dark city to point lost people to the Light of the world.

Conclusion

Sadly, thirty years after Paul wrote to Colossae and to Laodicea, the apostle John wrote to the church of Laodicea, warning them that the Lord was about to spew them out of His mouth because of their spiritual lukewarmness (Rev. 3:14-22). The testimony for Christ there was flickering dimly. Now (in modern Turkey) it is almost totally extinguished.

Jesus said (Matt. 5:14, 16), “You are the light of the world…. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” That’s our mandate in Christ and in Flagstaff!
Application Questions

1. Someone has observed that every person is a theologian, but some are better theologians than others. How can you grow more solid as a theologian?

2. Discuss: Can those who hold seriously wrong doctrine about Christ be saved?

3. What are the practical benefits of seeing yourself “in Christ”?

4. How can we be more intentional about being Christ’s church in Flagstaff? Be specific.

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