

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS

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EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS I

Background and Introduction

The books of Ephesians and Colossians may readily be studied together because of the similarity of their subject matter, as well as the fact that they were written at the same time and from the same place. Our approach will be one of a harmony, working through the two epistles simultaneously in a way that matches up parallel passages in the two books. Today, however, we will concentrate on the background material that will serve to enlighten our study.

AUTHORSHIP

The answer to this question is, of course, obvious - one need only read the first word of each epistle in order to ascertain that the author was the Apostle Paul. This has not stopped critics from questioning their authenticity, however. In general, critical arguments can be broken down into two categories.

“The book is too unlike Paul’s writings to have been written by Paul.” This argument comes in linguistic and theological variants.

- Linguistically, some scholars point to unique vocabulary found in one of these books that is not found in other Pauline writings. Perhaps they assume that Paul’s goal was that of the Good News Bible - to express the Gospel in the simplest possible form, using only the most common 500 words in the language. Paul obviously lacked the scholarly training and breadth of vocabulary of the critics themselves. Anyone who applied the same criteria to two articles written by one of these critics on two different subjects would doubtlessly find an even greater diversity of vocabulary.

A subtler form of the linguistic argument points to different uses of the same terms - Pauline words such as “mystery” and “fullness.” The explanation here is simpler. In Colossians, Paul was responding to a heresy for which these were technical terms; in Ephesians, he was expounding a positive theology.

- Theologically, critics argue that Paul could not have written Ephesians because the doctrine of the church found in it is too advanced, while he could not have written Colossians because it reflects the presence of Gnosticism, a second-century heresy. The fact of the matter is, however, that Ephesians is Paul’s last epistle with the exception of the Pastorals, and we should therefore expect it to represent a mature form of his theology. As far as Colossians is concerned, we now know that teachings similar to Gnosticism existed in the first century and even before (e.g., the Jewish “gnostic” Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus).

“The book is too much like Paul’s other writings to have been written by Paul.” The most common form of this argument is for critics to use Ephesians and Colossians against one another. Critics writing on Ephesians deny its authenticity because of its similarity to Colossians, and critics writing on Colossians deny its authenticity because of its similarity to Ephesians. Like critics of the Gospels, they assume that there would never be a reason for someone to say the same thing to two different groups of people. Even more remarkable, of course, is the fact that most critics use this

argument in combination with at least one form of the first one and never seem to notice the contradiction inherent in such specious reasoning.

On the positive side, Pauline authorship is affirmed by every available early source, from the Apostolic Fathers to the heretic Marcion to the Muratorian Canon.

DATE AND PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Ephesians and Colossians are prison epistles, as is obvious by the contents. Most scholars place the writing of these letters during Paul's (first) Roman imprisonment, about the year 62 A.D. The two were written at about the same time as Philippians and Philemon (which was addressed to a Christian in Colosse), with our two letters being carried by Tychicus, while Philippians was delivered by Epaphroditus and Philemon was delivered by the runaway slave Onesimus.

Some scholars argue for Caesarea or even Ephesus as the point of origin of the letters, but Acts records no imprisonment in Ephesus, while there is no indication that the people mentioned in these letters were present with Paul in Caesarea. These points of origin would, of course, alter the date of composition as well.

DESTINATION

While the destination of Colossians is obvious, that of Ephesians is less so. The main reason for this is that the phrase "in Ephesus" in the first verse of the epistle is missing from all of the oldest manuscripts of Paul's epistles. In addition, the letter, unlike most of Paul's epistles, contains no personal references to the recipients of the letter, nor does it describe specific circumstances that may have occasioned its writing. In short, Ephesians has very much the appearance of a general epistle, but without the general heading of books such as I and II Peter. We must also account, of course, for the fact that later manuscripts of the letter do mention Ephesus in the first verse.

The most satisfactory explanation for these circumstances is that Ephesians was intended to be a circular letter rather than a general epistle. As Tychicus traveled from Rome to the province of Asia in what is now western Turkey, he would have landed first at Ephesus, then traveled through numerous other cities where Paul had established churches on his way to the Lycus Valley cities of Colosse, Hierapolis, and Laodicea. In all likelihood, Paul gave him the letter known to us as Ephesians with instructions to read it in each of the churches where he stopped. This would explain both the absence of an addressee and the general character of the epistle. Since Ephesus was the capital of the province and contained the largest and most prominent church in the region, it is likely that the copy of the letter made and preserved in Ephesus became the basis for circulating the epistle more widely among the churches. Perhaps one of these later copies included the phrase "in Ephesus" in order to identify the place of origin of the work. Some have even suggested that Paul had left a blank space to be filled in by each of the receiving churches, but no manuscript has ever been found containing a church name in verse one other than that of Ephesus.

Another intriguing suggestion, and one that certainly falls within the realm of possibility, is that Ephesians is "the letter from Laodicea" mentioned in Colossians 4:16. If the circular epistle arrived in Colosse from the nearby city of Laodicea, this may well be the case.

PURPOSE

The two letters, though written at about the same time and from the same place, have very different purposes, despite the similarities in their contents. Colossians was clearly written to combat doctrinal aberration - some form of incipient Gnosticism that, while wearing the mask of Christianity, incorporated elements of Jewish legalism and pagan dualism and spirit-worship. Paul then elaborates on the practical consequences of this heresy in the moral lives of the people.

Ephesians, on the other hand, being written for a general audience, is much like Romans in that it contains a mature, orderly reflection on the great theological truths of the Gospel. The discourse on the Church provides the foundation for the practical advice given later in the Pastorals, while the instructions about family and social relationships are more theologically rooted than those in Colossians, despite the similarities in the two sections.

THE CITY OF EPHEBUS

The city of Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia and was a large and cosmopolitan commercial center. The focal point of the city was the huge temple dedicated to Artemis, the beauty and colossal size of which made it one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Paul had visited the city briefly near the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21), then returned there during his third missionary journey (Acts 19). After preaching in the synagogue, he moved to the lecture hall of Tyrannus, spending a total of two and a half years in the city. His contacts with people from all over the province led to the planting of churches in many towns in Asia (Colosse among them). His evangelistic success also angered those who were making money by manufacturing and selling images of Artemis, and the silversmiths' guild fomented a riot against Paul and his companions, after which he left the city. At the end of the third journey, he met the Ephesian elders at Miletus and gave them a farewell exhortation (Acts 20:17-38), after which he never visited the city again. As the base of Paul's church-planting operations in Asia, the city would have been the natural destination for a circular letter intended for all the churches of the province.

THE CITY OF COLOSSE

Unlike Ephesus, Colosse was a small and insignificant city. It had at one time been a prosperous trading center, but the construction of a new Roman road through the province had cut off Colosse, which was no longer on the major trade route (the letters in Revelation trace the progress of this Roman road, which passed through Laodicea, ten miles on the other side of the Lycus Valley from Colosse). Paul had never visited the city, though he knew many of the members of the church there (it is never mentioned in the book of Acts); apparently, the church had been planted by Epaphras, who also reported to Paul about the troubling heresy gaining a foothold in the church. It was also there that Philemon lived, and from there that the slave Onesimus had fled his master, only to be converted in Rome by the preaching of Paul, presumably in prison.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS II

Ephesians 1:1-14

Paul was a great theologian and a marvelous analyst of the deep truths of the Gospel. But perhaps the most telling aspect of his treatment of doctrine in Ephesians is that his analysis gives way time and again to praise. He is incapable of cold rumination upon the mercies of God. Thus the great truths expressed in this opening passage of Ephesians take the form of a Jewish blessing - a word of praise to God. The organization of the passage can be viewed in two ways; in one sense, it is chronological, tracing the plan of God from eternity past to its final completion in eternity future. But the passage is also Trinitarian in its structure, dealing with the contributions of the Father, Son, and Spirit to the salvation of sinners. Some have even speculated that what we have before us is a poem or song, with each section closing with the thematic refrain, “to the praise of His glory.” In our study we will utilize the Trinitarian structure while noting the progressive historical development.

INTRODUCTION (verses 1-2)

The salutation takes the standard form in use in the first century (author, recipients, greeting), yet has a distinctly Christian content. Paul writes, not merely as a concerned friend, but as an apostle appointed by God - what he says carries divine authority. The recipients are God’s people - “saints” who have been set aside for His purpose (like the sanctified vessels in the Tabernacle), and “faithful” both in the sense of having exercised faith and remaining true to their profession.

Verse 1 also introduces the key phrase in the book of Ephesians - “in Christ.” Paul emphasizes throughout the letter that all that Christians are and have is because of their relationship to Jesus Christ.

“Grace” and “peace” were the typical Greek and Hebrew greetings, respectively (though Paul uses a stronger form of the word than that usually used by the Greeks). Paul’s usage here not only indicates the unity of Jews and Gentiles, which will form a significant theme of the book, but also the root and result of God’s plan of salvation, with which the book begins.

CHOSEN BY GOD THE FATHER (verses 3-6)

Amazingly enough, verses 3-14 consist of one sentence - Paul got so wrapped up in praise to God for His mercies that he never bothered to come up for air.

Verse 3 - “in the heavenly realms” is another key phrase in this book. By it Paul envisions Christ enthroned at the right hand of God, with believers present with Him, basking in reflected glory. The intent is similar to his reference to heavenly citizenship in Philippians 3:20. [NOTE: If time permits, mention that this phrase was decisive in Darby’s development of dispensational theology. He was convinced that this statement could only be true after the ascension of Christ into Heaven, thus could not have been true of Old Testament Israel. The sharp distinction between Israel and the Church characteristic of some forms of dispensationalism, however, hardly fit the theme of the union of all believers in and with Christ developed by Paul in this letter.] When Paul indicates that every spiritual blessing is ours through Christ, he is both undermining the spiritual mediators

of the popular religions of his day and emphasizing that, without Christ, we are nothing and have nothing.

Verse 4 - The doctrine of election has been much-debated, of course, but one commentator rightly pointed out that only the greatest of fools would deny full course to the will of God in order to grant it to the will of man. More to the point, however, is the context in which Paul discusses election. He pictures it as historical (before the beginning of time, thus unconditioned and not subject to alteration), Christocentric (to be chosen in Christ means that God set His love upon us because of what the Son promised to do on our behalf), and purposeful (the immediate goal of election is to produce a race of righteous ones; those who argue that the doctrine of election mitigates against holy living have clearly missed the point).

Verse 5 - Adoption, which Paul here describes as an act of love, was unknown in Jewish society but was common among the Romans (the same function was fulfilled by levirate marriage among the Jews). Children (and sometimes adults) were adopted in order to secure the line of inheritance. Sometimes, as in the case of some Roman emperors, adoption was used when the biological heir proved unsatisfactory. Here, this was hardly the case. It is through the true heir, Christ Himself, that believers are incorporated into the family of God and become fellow-heirs of the spiritual blessings of Heaven. Again, note that Paul emphasizes the sovereign exercise of God's will in the adoption process.

Verse 6 - Paul brings the first stanza to a close with his refrain, and in so doing indicates the ultimate goal of God's great plan - to bring glory to Himself. The salvation of sinners is not an end in itself, but a means to an end - "that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

REDEEMED BY GOD THE SON (verses 7-12)

Verse 7 - We now turn to the role of the Son in salvation. In this verse, Paul describes it using two key words - "redemption" and "forgiveness." Christ shed His blood in order to buy His people out of bondage to sin, and the payment He made covered their sin and gained for them the forgiveness of God. Thus sin no longer controls or condemns the recipients of God's mercy.

Verse 8 - Commentators differ about whether the "wisdom and understanding" about which this verse speaks are characteristics of God through which He showers blessings on His people or some of the blessings He gives. The issue is ultimately irrelevant, since both are biblical truths. It is worth noting, however, that the wisdom openly showered upon all His children by God may easily be contrasted with the secret *gnosis* available only to the elite in the cults plaguing Asia Minor at the time Paul wrote.

Verse 9 - "Mystery" was another catchword of the cultists, but Paul here uses it to describe, not a secret to be closely guarded, but a newly-revealed truth to be broadcast to all who will hear. The mystery is God's plan of salvation, which had recently been unveiled through the ministry of Christ. What God had been planning since before time began, He had graciously made clear to His people.

Verse 10 - The ultimate goal of God's plan is here stated more explicitly. The word used here - "to sum all things up" in Christ - refers to the Greek practice of keeping business records in columns, then writing the totals at the top of each column. Paul is saying here that, when everything is added up at the end of time, the grand total will be Jesus Christ.

Verses 11-12 - Paul seemingly repeats himself here, but two points are worth noting. The first is that the same God who has planned all things is also carrying them out. Nothing is to be left to chance, and there are no contingencies. Secondly, he begins, by his use of pronouns, to address the theme of the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ - the "we" here speaks of the faithful remnant among the Jews, including Paul, of course, whom God had brought to Himself.

SEALED BY GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT (verses 13-14)

Verse 13 - Like the transition from the work of the Father to the work of the Son, the transition from Son to Spirit is gradual rather than sharp, befitting the involvement of the Triune Godhead in each aspect of the plan of salvation. The pronoun "you" refers to the Gentiles in the churches of Asia Minor and indicates that they were not second-class citizens of the Kingdom, but enjoyed the full blessings of the Jews, into whose olive tree they had been grafted (see Romans 11). In this verse, Paul describes the Holy Spirit as a seal, indicating authenticity, authority, and protection; the presence of the Spirit shows that those who are indwelt by Him are genuine Christians, belong to God, and are under the umbrella of His protection.

Verse 14 - Here the Spirit is described as a deposit or down payment. This was a Semitic term borrowed by the Greeks and referred to a partial payment in kind in anticipation of the full payment at a later time (in modern Greek, the term refers to an engagement ring). The Spirit thus gives a foretaste of Heaven, not only guaranteeing that we will inherit all the blessings that are ours as adopted brothers and sisters of Christ, but also guaranteeing that we will be part of God's heritage, as Israel was often described in the Old Testament.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS III

Ephesians 1:15-23; Colossians 1:1-14

We saw last week that the typical salutation of a first-century letter contained the author, the recipient, and a word of greeting. Another component frequently present in such a salutation was a word of thanksgiving to the appropriate deity, usually for something in the life of the author or the recipient. Again, Paul uses the standard form of the day while investing it with a uniquely Christian quality. In today's passages, we find the words of thanksgiving that Paul gives to God for the people to whom he writes - a component in almost all of his letters.

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

Paul follows the extended hymn of praise to the Triune God (verses 3-14) with words of thanks for the recipients of the letter. Note the following:

Verses 15-16 - "For this reason" is a frequently-used Pauline transition from one subject to another and also serves to connect the two ideas ("When you see the word *therefore*, always ask what it's there for!"). Paul recognizes that he could never give thanks for the superb spiritual qualities of the recipients had it not been for the outworking of God's marvelous plan of salvation in their lives. Note also that the wording implies that Paul did not know many of the recipients of the letter - highly unlikely if its only destination was Ephesus, where he spent three and a half years. Verse 16 is not hyperbole; Paul practiced what he preached when he told the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing."

Verse 17 - Note the connection with verse 8, and the fact that the purpose of wisdom and understanding is not for its own sake, or even to gain greater insight into the inner workings of the plan of God, but rather to gain knowledge of God Himself. The Spirit's job is to reveal God and His Son, not the secrets of the universe. Note also that what is used here to express general truth would have a much more specific referent in Colossians.

Verse 18 - Knowing God better transforms the Christian's vision. He sees with his heart as well as his eyes, and his view of things is drawn toward Heaven - the hope and inheritance to which we have been called. As usual, Paul's words here do not imply that his readers lack spiritual vision, but rather implore God that such vision might be increased.

Verses 19-20 - Paul gets caught up in superlatives again in these verses, piling on every synonym for "power" provided by the Greek language. [The term *hyperballon* ("incomparably great") means "above and beyond, into another sphere of existence"; cf. "hyperspace."] The greatest manifestation of this power was in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Christ, of which believers were also the beneficiaries. Notice, too, that once Paul starts thinking about the greatness of God, he has trouble getting his mind back on men again.

Verse 21 - The exaltation of Christ over all creatures for all time is in view here; again, the exaltation over heavenly powers (the terms used come from Jewish teachings about the angelic hierarchy, and can be used in either a positive or a negative sense) will have a much more specific meaning in Colossians. Here, the use is general, much like that in Romans 8:38-39.

Verses 22-23 - Christ's universal Lordship is here said to be for the benefit of the Church (one of only a few references to the Universal Church in Paul's letters). This in no way contradicts the emphasis on the glory of God found in the beginning of the chapter; rather it indicates that the unity of Christ and His people is so great that, when He is glorified, so are they! The wording here shows progression in Paul's thought from earlier discussions of the subject. The Corinthian epistles had described the Church as the body of Christ, but here he incorporates the idea of organic union by calling Christ the Head of the Church.

Note that the wording of verse 23 is problematic in the Greek. Scholars disagree over what is meant by calling the Church "the fullness of Christ." It could mean that Christ's love for His people is so great that He is incomplete without them (not in any ontological sense, of course), but more likely indicates that the union of Christ and His Church is so great that, as the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him (another phrase with specific intent in Colossians), so He dwells in His people in all fullness, so that He could rightly say, "I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" (John 14:20).

COLOSSIANS 1:1-14

We will spend less time on the Colossians passage, since it contains many things upon which we have already commented when they appeared in Ephesians.

Verses 1-2 - A typical Pauline salutation, upon which we have already commented.

Verse 3 - Prayer without ceasing again.

Verses 4-5 - The three great Christian virtues, best known from I Corinthians 13, here are linked by Paul, with hope playing the leading part. Love may endure when faith and hope have been fully realized, but hope drives the others in the sense that it motivates love and perseverance in a troublesome world.

Verse 6 - Paul rejoices over the spread of the Gospel. These words are of special significance to a congregation that is being seduced by another gospel. They need to be reminded that what they received at the beginning is the same Gospel of the grace of God that is being spread throughout the Roman world and is changing lives by the power of God wherever it goes. Any newer gospel can be nothing but a step downward.

Verse 7-8 - Paul not only affirms the original message through which the Colossians were converted, but also affirms Epaphras, through whom that message came, and who had reported to Paul the troubling heresy spreading in the Colossian church. With his words of praise, he also lets the church know that Epaphras' report had been balanced, and that he recognizes that there is genuine good news to be reported about the congregation and its progress.

Verse 9 - Here what may sound like typical Pauline buzz-words take on special meaning. "Knowledge" is *gnosis*, which the heretics were offering through esoteric meditations and asceticism (more on this next week). This knowledge, however, comes from God (whom the Gnostics believed was unknown and unknowable), not from some hierarchy of angelic mediators.

Verse 10 - The end of knowledge is holy living and greater knowledge of God Himself, not the smug superiority of the spiritual elite. Note that the term “please” here was in the common vocabulary of the day derogatory, referring to groveling or fawning behavior. Such behavior is blameworthy in the presence of mere men, but is entirely appropriate when directed toward the sovereign God.

Verses 11-12 - The themes of power and endurance, already addressed in Ephesians, are here coupled with joy, which results in thanksgiving - the kind Paul himself could give, even from a Roman prison.

Verses 13-14 - In another allusion to the angelic mediators of the Colossian false teachers, Paul reminds them that the spiritual powers that the false teachers hold in awe are nothing more nor less than Satan and his demons, under whom unbelievers lay in bondage. Paul then mentions the same blessings of salvation for which he had given such a paean of praise in the opening verses of Ephesians.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS IV

Colossians 1:15-23

We have before us today a beautiful and complex passage whose chief purpose has often been debated by commentators. Some view verses 15-20 as a popular Christian hymn quoted by Paul to undergird the assertion of verse 14 that believers have redemption and forgiveness of sins in Christ; they see these words of high praise as affirming the supremacy of Christ, and thus the fact that He is able to give to His people the gifts that Paul has spoken of them as having received. Others see in these verses a description of Christ's supremacy couched in the language of the Colossian errorists, affirming precisely those things that the heretics denied, and thus paving the way for the refutation of the false teaching with which the Colossian church was struggling.

There is a sense, however, in which this issue is insignificant. If indeed these verses incorporate an ancient Christian hymn, the words of this hymn voiced precisely the truths about Christ that the Colossians needed to hear in the light of the false teaching being disseminated in their midst. On the other hand, if these verses were explicitly intended to refute the heretics, they also stand on their own as a beautiful hymn of praise to Christ and flow smoothly from the context established by Paul's introductory prayer.

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

While many have seen in the Colossian heresy against which Paul argues an incipient form of Gnosticism, there can be little doubt that it combined with proto-Gnostic thought significant elements of both Judaism and Christianity, to which it was alien, but with both of which it occasionally occurred in syncretistic forms.

Though Gnosticism did not appear in full-blown form until the second century, its roots lie much further back. Its principal elements are Greek dualism and Oriental mysticism. The Greeks developed, principally from Plato's description of Ideas and Forms, the notion that spirit was the true reality and matter merely a shadow of it. The inferiority of matter was expressed in its finite, temporal and transient nature, and often caused the Greeks to deny its existence or to connect it with evil, while associating spirit with good. Oriental mysticism, on the other hand, particularly as it found expression in the mystery cults, claimed esoteric knowledge concerning the spiritual world and offered that knowledge only to initiates.

Into this dualistic, mystical framework, the Gnostics poured aspects of Christian content. The best example of such a combination is the Pleroma myth of *The Gospel of Truth*, written in the latter half of the second century by a Gnostic teacher named Valentinus. He pictures the unknowable Unknown Father, eternally existent in the darkness of the past. This Unknown Father created two spirit beings known as aeons, who in turn created four more, who created eight more, who created sixteen more, each in turn farther away from and less like the Unknown Father. These thirty aeons were known as the Pleroma - the "fullness" of the Godhead. One of the lesser aeons, Wisdom, rebelled, and created Demiurge, thus throwing the Pleroma out of balance. In order to restore balance, other aeons, named Jesus, Christ, Holy Spirit, and Achamoth (the Gnostic Satan) were created, but balance was never restored. These last aeons were so far away from the Unknown Father that they possessed elements of evil (Achamoth) as well as good (Jesus, Christ, and Holy

Spirit), or a combination of the two (Demiurge). It was Demiurge (the Jehovah of the Old Testament) who created the world (evil matter) and the souls of men (thus explaining the combination of good and evil we see in mankind). Jesus, a lower member of the Pleroma, was a spirit being, thus did not have a human body (a heretical teaching known as Docetism), but certainly could not be described as God Himself. In order to come to God, we must go through the spirit mediators of the Pleroma, including, but certainly not restricted to, Jesus. The Gnostics were thus Christian in their profession, but their doctrine bore only the barest similarity to “the faith once entrusted to the saints.”

In Colosse, the false teaching that had entered the church also contained Jewish elements. A form of Jewish Gnosticism had been popularized in the early first century by the Alexandrian philosopher Philo, so such a combination was by no means out of the ordinary. The Jewish elements of the heresy in Colosse included special emphasis on circumcision as an initiatory rite into the mysteries to which the false teachers claimed access, the use of terms from Jewish angelology for the hierarchy of mediatorial spirits, and an emphasis on a type of asceticism common to such Jewish fringe groups as the Essenes.

In closing, it should be noted that Greek dualism, and thus Gnosticism, produced widely opposing systems of morality. In the same way that the Stoics showed their scorn for the flesh by avoiding all that appealed to it, while the Epicureans showed their unconcern for the flesh by allowing it free reign as if it mattered not at all, the Colossian heresy drove some to asceticism and others to licentiousness. In the course of the epistle, Paul will deal with both forms of perversion.

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST IN CREATION (verses 15-17)

As already noted, this passage fits into the context established by Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving by providing an explanation of why Christ is able to provide redemption and forgiveness of sins for His people. As we go through, we will note both the positive significance of Paul’s words and their implications in the face of the Colossian heresy.

Verse 15 - The word translated “image” here is *eikon*, which means “exact representation,” as in a mirror. The likeness intended is not physical, of course. When Christ is said to be the “firstborn” over all creation (*prototokos*), this is not intended to imply His origin in time (contra Arius, a fourth-century Alexandrian preacher who taught that Christ was the first created being - a doctrine picked up in modern times by the Jehovah’s Witnesses), but rather his temporal priority to and supremacy over all created things. As God’s “firstborn,” He has the right of primogeniture, by which He inherits and rules all in the Father’s domain. This teaching is in clear contrast to the Gnostic idea that Christ was so far removed from the Unknown Father as to be very unlike Him indeed, and that even His distance from the Father was not enough to position Him to soil His hands with the corrupt matter of the creation.

Verse 16 - Paul here ascribes the creation of the entire universe, both material and spiritual, to Christ - including those angelic powers that the false teachers would view as mediators, superior in honor and power to Christ Himself. Not only have all matter and spirit come into being through Christ’s instrumentality, but His glory is the goal toward which the creation of all these things is directed.

Verse 17 - "Before" again implies both temporal priority and supremacy. Paul then extends the supremacy of Christ from the past into the present, noting that it is His power that sustains the entire universe - without His continuing involvement, the universe would collapse. The so-called "laws of nature" function with regularity only because of the continual exercise of divine power (implying that miracles are nothing more than God doing things in a way other than His usual mode of operation).

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST IN REDEMPTION (verses 18-20)

The fact that the structure in these verse closely parallels that in verses 15-17 has led many to suspect that Paul was utilizing an ancient Christian hymn. While this is certainly a possibility, it is not required by textual or contextual evidence and does little to enhance our understanding of the passage. One thing that is obvious, however, is that Paul is here showing how the supremacy of Christ described in the previous verses allows Him to grant the forgiveness of sins described in verse 14.

Verse 18 - In the same way that Christ is the ruler of the universe, He is also the ruler of His Church (we have already seen that the concept of Christ as the Head of the Church is new to the prison epistles of Ephesians and Colossians, though Paul has spoken of the Church as the Body of Christ in earlier letters). His temporal priority and supremacy are seen particularly in His conquest of death, where He was both the first to overcome death and the One who gave power over death to those who put their faith in Him.

Verse 19 - Here Paul actually uses *Pleroma*, the Gnostic term for the fullness of the Godhead. Christ is not simply a minor element of this Fullness, but incorporates all that God is in Himself.

Verse 20 - An important aspect of Christ's supremacy is that He should rule over all things. The disharmony introduced into the world by sin is to be overcome through the work of Christ, and all creation is to be reconciled to God in Him. As we know from numerous other passages of Scripture (and also see the conditional wording of verse 23), this is not to be understood as implying universal salvation (contra. Origen, who believed that all, including the Devil, would ultimately be saved), but rather the universal submission of Philippians 2:10-11. Thus the "principalities and powers" that the errorists worshiped were not only created by Christ, but ultimately, whether in joy or by coercion, will bow down before Him.

THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST IN THE COLOSSIANS (verses 21-23)

Paul cannot let this beautiful passage pass without a bit of personal application to the Colossians. In verse 21, he points out to them that they were formerly part of the chaotic world of sin, cut off from God by nature and His enemies by virtue of disposition and behavior.

Verse 22 - Christ's death has cleansed them and paid for their sins, so that they may stand before God spotless and pure. The verse not only emphasizes that the goal of redemption is holy living, but also uses a peculiar redundancy - "physical body" - calculated to refute the docetic tendencies of the Greek and Gnostic dualists.

Verse 23 - Only those who persevere may justifiably feel secure in their salvation. While all who are saints persevere, only those who persevere are saints. The Colossians are in serious danger of being drawn away from the faith they have professed by the errorists in their midst. Their esoteric “new gospel” is not the Gospel proclaimed to them by Epaphras, nor the one spread throughout the world by the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS V

Ephesians 2:1-10

At the beginning of Ephesians 2, Paul returns to the theme of how his readers were incorporated into the body of Christ by the gracious work of God. As he often does (cf. Romans 1-3), he emphasizes the greatness of God's work by first portraying the depths of man's depravity. The passage ends with one of the most famous statements on salvation by grace alone in the New Testament.

DEAD IN SIN (verses 1-3)

In another evidence of the fact that this epistle was dictated by Paul, the first seven verses are all one sentence in the original. Worse yet, verse one begins with the direct object of the sentence, while the subject doesn't appear until verse four ("God"), and the main verb finally shows up in verse five ("made alive")! In essence, verses 2-3 are a parenthetical expansion on the idea of being "dead in transgressions and sins" expressed in the first verse.

Verse 1 - While it is true that the "you" of this verse, reflecting back to Paul's usage in 1:13, refers to the Gentiles among his readers, the truth expressed is universal, as he makes clear in verse 3. No image more clearly communicates the hopelessness of the unregenerate than Paul's striking use of the word "dead." As the dead man can do nothing to change his condition, so the sinner is helpless in his sin. Some have sought to draw a line of distinction between transgressions ("crossing over a line" or "deviating from the designated path") and sins ("missing the mark" or "falling short of the necessary goal"), but no such hair-splitting is required by the passage. Paul often uses the richness of the language at his command to underscore the seriousness of that with which he deals.

Verse 2 - "In which you used to live" translates the Hebrew idea of "walking around" in something, as if it were the natural medium in which one existed. Paul then piles up phrases to describe that evil environment: "ways of this world" (*aeon* - a word Paul would have used with much more specific referent in Colossians - of this *kosmos*), designating the temporal and spacial extent of this unhealthy atmosphere; "the ruler of the kingdom of the air," by which Paul notes that Satan himself is dominant in this sphere (Jewish cosmology took the "air" part literally, though there is no compelling reason for us to do so; and "the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." This final phrase could refer either to Satan and his minions, or to the "spirit of the age," the malignant worldview that fills the minds of those who hate God.

Verse 3 - The dead not only have a false worldview and a malicious master, but also live out in their lives the consequences of their poisonous beliefs. The poison is universal, its root in our fallen natures, and its consequences dire. What the unregenerate mind thinks, it desires, and what it desires, it does. The ultimate consequence is God's just wrath, which manifests itself temporally in allowing sin to have its course and eternally in the final judgment and separation of unbelievers from Himself forever.

ALIVE IN CHRIST (verses 4-7)

Verses 4-5 - The landscape of dry bones painted by Paul in the previous verses could have been the final picture, but is not. The reason is not because of anything desirable in those whose rotting carcasses sent up a stench into the nostrils of God, but rather because of God's unaccountable love for His fallen creatures. That love moved Him to pity, which moved Him to grace - that grace by which we (Paul changes the pronoun here to the more inclusive "us") were raised from death to life through the work of Christ. Such grace brings an exclamation from Paul's lips of a truth he is going to explain two sentences later.

Verse 6 - The theme of union with Christ again comes into play as Paul moves from Christians being made alive with Christ to Christians being raised with Him and seated in Heaven with Him (the three verbs all have the same prefix [*sum*] in Greek, thus making the parallel syntax much more evident). God's grace was by no means small. He not only gave dead sinners life, but also made them new creatures and raised them to exalted positions in union with His own dear Son.

Verse 7 - As in chapter one, Paul expresses the thought that the plan of salvation is not an end in itself, but rather serves the end of giving glory to God. Christians are trophies who display in themselves the marvelous character of a loving God.

ALL OF GRACE (verses 8-10)

As if the emphasis on the helplessness of man and the great mercy of God had not done so already, Paul feels the need to stress directly the gracious character of salvation. This should come as no surprise to us, since all around us we see those who, for whatever reason, insist on claiming for themselves some of the credit for a salvation for which the glory belongs to God alone.

Verse 8 - Salvation is by grace alone from beginning to end, and is apprehended by faith - trust placed in the merits of Christ, apart from any human deserving. This faith is in itself a gift, for what dead man is capable of reaching out toward the source of life, even if offered freely? [NOTE: Those who argue that the gift spoken of by Paul is salvation rather than faith do so on the basis of the difference in gender between the noun translated "faith" and the pronoun "this." Such an argument doesn't work for two reasons: First of all, there is ample evidence in the secular literature of the period for *touto* being used without gender agreement; secondly, it would be entirely disruptive of Paul's argument to suggest that he means to say that salvation is a gift, but faith is something you need to do to get it.]

Verse 9 - Paul wants to rule out any boasting. This requires that a man contribute nothing to his own salvation. If I am saved and you are not, this communicates nothing distinguishing about me or you, but only something about God.

Verse 10 - Paul makes it clear that while works are not in any sense the cause of salvation, they are infallibly the result of salvation. The word translated "workmanship" here is the Greek word from which we get our English word "poem" and pictures Christians as carefully crafted works of art. These works of art are not simply to be looked at, although that is one thing Paul had in mind (verse 7), but also to serve as instruments through which the work of God in the world is carried

forth. These works were planned by God before the foundation of the world in the same sense that our salvation was - there can be no dichotomy between salvation and service, since the two are inextricably linked together in the mind and plan of God.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS VI

Ephesians 2:11-22

Having sketched out the plan of salvation in the first part of chapter 2, Paul now turns specifically to the implications of this plan for the Jewish-Gentile conflict that plagued the Early Church in so many ways. He addresses the Gentiles directly because of the predominantly Gentile composition of the churches in western Asia Minor.

WHAT THE GENTILES WERE (verses 11-12)

Verse 11 - Paul knows that gratitude for present blessings grows out of appreciation for one's former plight, so he begins by referring to the Gentiles with two uncomplimentary terms used by the Jews to describe them. "Gentiles" is literally "ethnics," a term equivalent in its connotations to "alien," "infidel" or "pagan" (among the ruder sort of Jews, the word was almost always followed by "dogs"). "Uncircumcised" carried the sense of inferiority, conveying that the person being described lacked the necessary prerequisite for acceptance. Judaism clearly had become a very exclusive religion, though this had never been God's ultimate intention. It is not Paul's desire to throw insults at his readers, however; he immediately reminds them that those who hold circumcision so highly do so out of a misunderstanding of what it was intended to represent, and that the sign itself is meaningless apart from a changed heart.

Verse 12 - It would be foolish to think that the Gentiles were held back merely by Jewish prejudice, however. Their disqualifications were very real, and Paul enumerates five of them in this verse.

- "separate from Christ" - They were not only unsaved, but had no hope of a Messiah who would deliver them from their lostness.
- "excluded from citizenship in Israel" - The term Paul uses here is the same used to describe the coveted Roman citizenship, without which one could never enjoy the full rights and privileges of the Empire. Even the God-fearers, who worshiped in the synagogues, and the "aliens within your gates," who enjoyed many benefits of living among God's people, were forever shut out from full participation.
- "foreigners to the covenant of the promise" - When God said, "I will be your God and you will be my people," the Gentiles were left out. The promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not include them.
- "without hope" - Lacking any special relationship to God or His people, the Gentiles lived a fundamentally hopeless existence. The grim view of death prevalent among the Greeks and Romans demonstrates this graphically.
- "without God in the world" - This does not mean that they worshiped no gods, nor that some of them had not been chosen by God from all eternity, nor that they were not beneficiaries of God's providence. It simply means that they had no knowledge of the true God, nor did they benefit from His special care.

WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE (verses 13-18)

Verse 13 - Paul here describes the great reversal that has been brought about by Christ. The terms “far” and “near” were used commonly by the Jews in relationship to the Temple in Jerusalem. They implied that the Gentiles, who lived far from the Temple and outside the Holy Land, were also far from God. The Jews, of course, were “near.” [NOTE: The language of Scripture reflects a similar use of “up” and “down” - one always goes up to Jerusalem and down from it, and not just because of its high elevation.]

Verse 14 - The thrust of this entire paragraph is that, when God makes peace with men, He also brings them into peace with one another. In referring to the “dividing wall of hostility,” Paul probably has in mind the wall that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of Israel in the Temple in Jerusalem. Josephus tells us that a large sign on the wall warned that any Gentile passing beyond it was courting his own death. Ironically, Paul was in prison as he wrote this letter because he had been falsely accused of taking Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, beyond this barrier in the Temple grounds (Acts 21:29).

Verse 15a - In what sense did the law create hostility between Jews and Gentiles, and in what sense did Christ “abolish it in His flesh?” The Bible makes it clear that the moral law did not divide men, but unite them in their accountability to it and failure to keep it. What divided Jews and Gentiles was the ceremonial law, with its circumcision and sacrifices. These were appalling to the Gentiles and caused the Jews to look down on the Gentiles in turn. Great prejudice on both sides stemmed from the Jewish ceremonial. But Christ, by fulfilling that to which the ceremonies pointed, abolished them, and in so doing, took away the barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles.

Verses 15b-16 - It was most particularly the death of Christ on the cross that had accomplished this. The result was not merely to put the Gentiles on an equal footing with the Jews, but to raise both to a higher level and make something completely new - the Body of Christ.

Verses 17-18 - Both horizontal and vertical dimensions of salvation are again visible in these verses. Those who were far away and those who were near alike needed the Gospel and were brought together by it. Furthermore, Christ served as the Mediator between man and God, bridging the gap that separated them and giving them access to the Father by the Spirit (note again Paul’s insistence on the Trinitarian character of salvation).

WHAT THE GENTILES ARE (verses 19-22)

Verse 19 - The disabilities of verse 12 have been turned around. The Gentiles are no longer rank pagans, nor even second-class citizen “strangers within the gates.” They have full citizenship rights and privileges, and full family privileges as well.

Verse 20 - Paul now switches to a new metaphor - that of a building. The building he describes is a Temple, but not the one in Jerusalem. This new Temple has Christ as its cornerstone (there is still some debate among commentators as to precisely what type of stone Paul had in mind here - the capstone of an arch, the capstone at the top of a corner, or, most likely, the stone at the corner of the foundation upon which the entire building was lined up). The rest of the foundation,

lined up according to the standard He established, consists of the apostles and prophets. Since a new building is envisioned, and because of the order of the words, it is unlikely that Paul had the Old Testament prophets in view, but referred instead to New Testament prophets, who with the apostles received the revelation that formed the basis for the new order. If he is speaking of the Old Testament prophets, it would be another indication of the union of Jews and Gentiles in the new order of things. [NOTE: This verse provides one of the strongest arguments against the Catholic doctrine of Apostolic Succession. While the building was continuing to be built, the foundation had already been laid. Once it had been laid, there was no need for an ongoing apostolic office.]

Verse 21 - As already noted, the Cornerstone is the standard against which all else is measured. The building derives its form and unity from that standard. Note also that the word used here for “temple” refers not to the entire building, but to the inner sanctuary that was the abode of the god (the same term was used, both for the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem and for the compartment that housed the image of Artemis in the famous temple in Ephesus). The Church, as a corporate body, is the very dwelling place of God. [It is worth noting that Paul uses this image far more often in a corporate sense than in an individual one, though we most often hear it quoted in reference to individual believers.]

Verse 22 - The building is organic, growing, ever becoming by the agency of God’s Spirit more like the image of the Cornerstone that is its standard (note the relationship of this concept to the Christian idea of “edification”).

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS VII

Ephesians 3:1-21; Colossians 1:24-2:5

In both of these epistles, Paul finds it necessary to speak of his role and authority as an apostle. The circumstances, however, differ greatly from those passages in other letters, such as the ones to Corinth. In the Corinthian epistles, Paul is defending his apostolic office against those who are attacking it. Here, it is not Paul who is under attack. The Gospel itself is under attack by false teachers spreading heresies pretending to secret and superior knowledge. Before such exciting prospects, the plain Gospel preached by men such as Epaphras paled in comparison. Paul thus seeks to support the sound teaching of his associates by throwing the entire weight of his apostolic authority behind it. These sections are included, therefore, not because the readers questioned Paul's apostolic authority, but precisely because they believed it. In today's lesson, we will begin with Colossians, then turn to the longer Ephesians passage.

PAUL'S AUTHORITY AGAINST THE FALSE TEACHERS (Colossians 1:24-2:5)

1:24 - This is one of the most difficult verses in the book of Colossians. The first part of the verse is obvious - Paul is suffering for the sake of the Colossians, not because they were in any way involved with his arrest and imprisonment, but because his imprisonment stemmed directly from his ministry to the Gentiles. The second part of the verse is what causes the difficulties. The Roman Catholic interpretation - that Paul here speaks of a storehouse of merit to which the saints and martyrs contribute by their redemptive sufferings, and which thus plays a role in the salvation of sinners - can be rejected out of hand because such an interpretation completely contradicts everything Paul teaches about the sufficiency of Christ and His work. Such an assertion would be doubly foolish in a book like Colossians, where the sufficiency of Christ is the key issue at stake in the contest against the false teachers. But if Paul is not speaking of a redemptive storehouse of merit, what does he mean? The first thing to note is that the Greek word translated "afflictions" is never used in Scripture to describe Christ's death, so that any redemptive implications of the verse may be ruled out immediately. Instead, we should turn to passages where Jesus tells His disciples that, if men persecuted Him, they would persecute them also. Furthermore, Christ is so closely identified with His body that any suffering believers undergo for His sake is felt by Him ("Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME?"). Paul is not therefore saying that there was anything about Christ's work that was incomplete, but rather that Christ goes on suffering through His persecuted people, and that what Paul is experiencing is part of the suffering ordained for him, which obviously was not yet complete.

1:25-27 - Paul now uses his divinely-bestowed apostolic commission to set his readers straight about the true Gospel, using in the process several of the buzz-words of the false teachers, such as "fullness" and "mystery." The word of God in its fullness is not something to be found among the false teachers, with their promises of esoteric knowledge, but is plainly presented in the preaching of Paul and his associates. The mystery is not for the elite only, but has been disclosed to all the saints and consists of the truth that Christ Himself dwells in His people, both Jew and Gentile alike.

1:28 - The proclamation, warning, and instruction carried out by the preachers of the Gospel brings the wisdom of God to all. The "perfect" (another Gnostic buzz-word) are not the initiates, but all believers who are brought finally into conformity to the image of Christ.

1:29-2:1 - Paul piles up words to describe how hard he is working for the people of God. This work is only possible because of the power of God working within him. It is also worth noting that the effort he describes with such strong words must be the labor of prayer - in prison, chained to two guards night and day, he could do little else.

2:2-3 - Note that the understanding for which Paul prays for the Colossians is not so much cognitive as attitudinal - encouragement, love - and is to be found in relationship with Christ, who is the heart of the mystery revealed in the last days. Verse 3 again emphasized the complete sufficiency of Christ. He is not a minor aeon, but the one in whom all wisdom dwells.

2:4-5 - The reason for Paul's emphasis on his apostolic authority now becomes evident - he does not want his readers to be swayed by the clever arguments of the false teachers. He also encourages the Colossians by telling them that he is pleased with the extent to which they have been able to avoid falling prey to the instruments of Satan who have entered in among them.

PAUL'S AUTHORITY AGAINST THE PERSECUTORS (Ephesians 3:1-13)

This section is another one of Paul's great digressions in the book of Ephesians. He continues the prayer of which the entire first half of Ephesians consists, but his mention of his imprisonment leads him off on a tangent, lest his readers lose heart because of the suffering he is experiencing for the sake of the Gospel.

Verse 1 - No matter what his readers may think, Paul has no illusions. He is not the prisoner of Nero or of Rome, but of Jesus Christ. He can rejoice in his suffering because he knows that it is part of doing what God has called him to do.

Verses 2-3 - He returns now to the theme upon which he had touched briefly before - the mystery entrusted to him through divine revelation.

Verse 4-5 - The revelation was not given to Paul alone, but is part of the truth being unveiled in the last days by the Spirit. [Some have suggested that the use of the term "holy apostles and prophets" is too self-aggrandizing to have been written by Paul, but they forget that the term "holy" conveyed none of the "holier-than-thou" connotations it holds today, but simply referred to those who were set apart.]

Verse 6 - The Old Testament had taught very clearly that the Gentiles were to share in the blessings of God, from the promise to Abraham onward (despite the fact that the Jews of Jesus' day seem to have forgotten these passages). What was new was that the Old Covenant was to pass away, and Jews and Gentiles were to be incorporated on totally equal footing into a new covenant, forming a new people of God. Paul again uses a series of three *syn-* compounds, one of which he coined for the purpose.

Verses 7-9 - The humility of these verses is completely typical of Paul and could never have been penned by one of his supposed disciples. Paul pictures himself as totally unworthy, a sinner called by grace to serve.

Verses 10-11 - If one lets the truth of verse 10 sink in for a moment, it is truly amazing. One of God's purposes in redemption is so that His redeemed people can teach something of His gracious character *to the angels!* Angels, of course, having no need of grace, have no experience of it, thus may learn and marvel at the grace of God displayed among men (this may help to explain Paul's cryptic words in I Corinthians 11:10). Furthermore, the reference addresses directly an aspect of false teaching circulating in western Asia Minor that affirmed that men could and should seek to learn the secrets of heavenly wisdom from angelic beings. Paul notes that exactly the opposite is the case.

Verse 12 - Paul cannot discuss anything without application. His point here is that God's grace has given His people free access (literally "freedom of speech") to His throne.

Verse 13 - Paul finally gets to the point of the digression. He is concerned that the readers might be discouraged to see him in prison. Instead, they should be encouraged, because God is using Paul's imprisonment for their benefit - if for no other reason, then certainly because of the present letter.

PAUL'S PRAYER FOR HIS READERS (Ephesians 3:14-21)

Paul now returns to the prayer from which he had earlier digressed, as indicated by his repetition of the opening phrase of the chapter.

Verses 14-15 - The prayer is trinitarian in structure, like so many other passages in this epistle (the New Testament is so deeply infused with the doctrine of the Trinity that it goes far beyond any mere proof-texting). Paul addresses God the Father, but the description of verse 15 is somewhat ambiguous. While the NIV translation fits the context better, with its indication that all of God's people, in Heaven and on earth, are part of one family of which He is the Father, the marginal reading "all fatherhood" fits the grammar of the sentence better (because of the absence of the definite article required by the translation in the text). The latter reading would imply that God is the prototype from which the entire concept of fatherhood is derived. While this would seem to have little relevance to the immediate context, it certainly fits the teaching of the epistle as a whole (see 5:22-33).

Verse 16 - The Spirit is the instrument through which God lives in His people. Note that Paul again piles up words for strength. Some have suggested that Paul borrowed the concept of the "inner being" from Plato, but Paul partakes of none of that great philosopher's implied dualism.

Verse 17 - No contradiction should be imagined here. Christ dwells in the hearts of Christians through the Spirit. Paul then goes on to mix metaphors in much the way he did at the end of chapter two. There he switched from a household to a building; here he speaks of both a tree and a building.

Verses 18-19 - Christ's love is beyond measure, multi-dimensional. But how can we know that which is beyond knowledge? This is another one of the great paradoxes of Scripture, but is understood rather easily. Christians, through the indwelling Spirit, know by experience that which they cannot hope to comprehend rationally. In bringing to a conclusion his Trinitarian prayer for his

readers, Paul speaks of them as having all that there is of God within them (perhaps another sideways shot at the errorists, as well).

Verses 20-21 - Paul ends with a doxology, again describing what God is able to do as “over the top and into another dimension.” The wording in verse 21 is a bit peculiar, but again emphasizes the unity of Christ and His Church and reflects an ascending order of importance - the Church, and Christ, its Head, giving glory to God for all eternity. Amen.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS VIII

Colossians 2:6-23

In the passage before us today, Paul makes his most direct attacks on the Colossian heresy, and it is from this passage that we get our fullest picture of what the false teachers were trying to foist upon the Christians in Colosse. In today's section, we find again that doctrine and practice are inseparable, as Paul concerns himself not only with the false teachings of the errorists, but also with the consequences of those teachings for the daily lives of the Colossian Christians.

THE BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN LIBERTY (verses 6-15)

Passages in Romans and I Corinthians dealing with Christian liberty contain warnings against the abuse of that liberty in ways that would hinder the development of the weaker brothers in the congregation. We see none of this in Colossians. The danger here was that Christians would be taken into bondage by unbiblical rules and regulations, and thus lose the benefits of the liberty for which Christ had paid so high a price.

Verse 6 - Paul warns the Christians at Colosse to continue living according to what they had "received" - a biblical kind of "tradition" that has its roots in revelation rather than in the doctrines of men. They are to stand firm in the truth of Jesus Christ and not be seduced by promises of "new insights."

Verse 7 - As we saw in Ephesians last week, here again Paul mixes the images of a tree and a building, appropriately picturing the Church as a structure that grows. It is worth noting that those who are rooted in the true faith manifest thankfulness rather than discontent; they are satisfied with Christ, not always searching for something new.

Verse 8 - There is nothing wrong with philosophy in itself - it simply means the love of wisdom. But hollow and deceptive philosophy is that which draws its wisdom from man rather than from God. Humanistic philosophy is not merely inadequate - it is wrong and deceptive. The reference to "the basic principles of this world" can be taken in one of two ways. The word used here could mean "the basics" in the sense that we would speak of "the ABCs" and would involve Paul in mocking the errorists, with their claims of deep, esoteric thought, by calling their teachings simple and childish. Much more likely, however, is that Paul intends to refer to the spiritual powers of the universe as depicted by the false teachers. This fits in with the mention of angel worship in verse 18. The Colossian errorists claimed to have received their knowledge from angelic intelligences.

Verse 9 - The basic problem with the Colossian heresy is that it undermined the absolute supremacy of Christ. Contrary to any Pleroma myth, Paul asserts that all the "fullness of the Godhead" resides, not only in Christ alone, but in His *body* - a concept anathema to the dualism of those primitive Gnostics.

Verse 10 - If all the fullness of God dwells in Christ, it also dwells in Christians, who have Christ within them. Who could ask for anything more? Why seek out angelic mediators when Christ is within you? When the verse speaks of Christ as the head over powers and authorities, it

pictures Him as their conqueror, rather than as the head over a body. The powers of darkness were routed by Christ on the cross. Who would forsake Christ to look to them?

Verses 11-12 - One of the Judaistic aspects of the Colossian heresy appears to have been a great emphasis on the rite of circumcision. Paul asserts that the inadequate shadow of the old dispensation has been supplanted by something greater - the reality of the present. Instead of surgically removing a piece of flesh, Christ has cut away the entire old nature! This operation was performed through the believer's union with Christ on the cross, where we died to sin and rose to newness of life - all of which is symbolized (but not accomplished) by baptism. [NOTE: This passage is a favorite of paedobaptists, who see in it a link between circumcision and baptism that suggests that, since one has supplanted the other, the subjects of the latter should be the same as the subjects of the former - namely, the children of the covenant people. Such an argument is undermined by Paul's reference to faith in verse 12. While the analogy between baptism and circumcision is valid, it is necessary to note that, since one entered the community of the Old Covenant by physical birth, the sign of the covenant was administered at the time of physical birth. Similarly, since one enters the community of the New Covenant through spiritual birth, the sign of that covenant is suitably administered at the time of spiritual birth.]

Verses 13-14 - How was this "spiritual circumcision" accomplished? Through the forgiveness of sins obtained on the cross and the new life gained at the resurrection of Christ. Verse 14 pictures the law as a criminal indictment nailed to the cross on which the offender was executed. Because the penalty of the law was paid by Christ, it no longer has power to accuse or condemn those united with Him. Does this mean that the law no longer has any validity? No, it simply means that it has no more power to condemn (it never had any power to save). Thus the Colossian false teachers, who held out a long list of man-made rules and regulations as necessary for salvation, were subjecting their listeners to a discredited instrument.

Verse 15 - The picture here is of a triumphal procession staged by a conquering hero. The cross becomes the chariot on which the conqueror rides, while his defeated foes are led captive behind him, stripped and shamed for all to see. Who would subject themselves to the captives rather than the captor?

THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY (verses 16-23)

Verse 16 - Paul urges his readers not to allow others to adjudge them ineligible for the prize because of their failure to observe man-made rules. Legalism and asceticism were hallmarks of the Colossian heresy. This involved both Jewish and pagan elements - Jews had their dietary laws, while pagan ascetics were often vegetarians; the only Jewish example of abstaining from certain drink was the Nazirite vow. The religious festivals cited were annual, monthly, and weekly. The Jewish ceremonial law had much to say about these. Such legalistic strictures were not unique to the Colossian errorists, of course. Christians over the years have had an inordinate number of squabbles over matters of the calendar, whether concerning the celebrations of holidays like Christmas and Easter or the regulations for Sabbath observance.

Verse 17 - That the legalisms were of a peculiarly Jewish character is revealed in this verse, where Paul speaks of them as shadows of a reality that had now arrived in Christ. Such a description

certainly fits the Old Testament ceremonies and feasts, though it would not be appropriate for pagan traditions.

Verse 18 - Paul here characterizes the false teachers. He says that they are men of false humility (anyone who delights in humility is immediately suspect). They pride themselves on how humble they are and require others to meet their definition of appropriate self-abasement. The “worship of angels” is in all likelihood a reference to the incipient Gnosticism that eventually resulted in the full-blown hierarchy of aeons described by Valentinus in the *Gospel of Truth*. One commentator noted with interest that the recognition of Michael the Archangel as a saint in the Catholic Church traces its roots to western Asia Minor - the destination of this letter.

The false teachers are also described as men who glory in their visions. They claim that their new teachings are the results of visitations by angelic beings, and they place great stock in the knowledge gained in this way, inflating their own importance in the process. Such a pattern has been perpetuated by many over the centuries, all the way from Muhammad to Joseph Smith.

Verse 19 - The basic problem of the false teachers, however, is that they have lost contact with Christ. He has been subordinated in their teaching to the visions of the teachers and the hierarchy of spiritual powers from whom those visions allegedly came. But growth for the Christian comes only through union with Christ. A limb cut off from the Head, like a branch cut off from the vine, quickly withers and dies.

Verses 20-21 - The legalism and asceticism of the false teachers is pictured by Paul as part of that domination by sin and Satan from which the Christian has been liberated by Christ. In the same way that it is inconceivable for the Christian to continue to live in sin after having been delivered from it (Romans 6), it is also inconceivable for him to continue to subject himself to legalistic, man-made regulations. Why is asceticism put on the same level with ongoing adultery, for instance? Simply because both deny the transforming grace of God in a person’s life - one because it involves living as if God had never changed me, the other because it involves living as if I must change myself. Both strike at the heart of the biblical doctrine of sanctification.

Verses 22-23 - Legalism and asceticism are futile because the one is based on the temporal teachings of finite men while the other concerns itself unduly with the temporal things of this world, which pass away even as they are consumed. They are also futile, despite their veneer of wisdom and godliness, because they accomplish exactly the opposite of what is intended. In the same way that false humility produces pride, so false abstinence causes one to focus on that from which one is abstaining (e.g., monkish visions of seductive dancing girls in their caves).

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS IX

Ephesians 4:1-16

As is typical of Paul's style, the epistle to the Ephesians may be divided up neatly into doctrinal and practical sections. This does not mean, of course, that he includes no application with his doctrine or no doctrine with his application. It simply indicates that, having spent three chapters praising God for the glories of the salvation he has given to believers in Christ, he now moves on to talk to his readers about the behavior that should result from such life-changing grace.

UNITY IN THE BODY (verses 1-6)

Verse 1 - As at the beginning of chapter three, Paul speaks of his status as a prisoner of Christ, not to elicit sympathy, but to remind his readers of the context in which his words are spoken. The word translated "worthy" here speaks of balancing a scale; Paul thus exhorts his readers to live their lives in a way that is in balance with the calling they have received in Christ.

Verse 2 - Such a balanced life includes four virtues mentioned in this verse - humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. The first was considered a negative trait by the surrounding culture, but Paul raises it to the level of a virtue by citing Christ as an example of its practice (cf. Philippians 2). Patience involves being willing to be hurt rather than administer hurt to others, while forbearance involves putting up with the foibles and idiosyncrasies of others (who meanwhile are putting up with yours). These traits flow from love, which is itself a product of the divine calling.

Verse 3 - Paul here exhorts his readers to maintain what he next will insist already exists. The point is simply that, since God has already made us one, we ought to act accordingly. This unity has been produced by the work of the Spirit, and the resulting peace with God should bind Christians to one another.

Verses 4-6 - The manifestations of the unity that Christians enjoy are next set forth in Trinitarian form. The Spirit has incorporated all Christians into one Body - not one each for Jews and Gentiles - and each member of that Body looks forward to one hope of glory in Heaven. All acknowledge one Lord Jesus Christ (in contrast to the many gods worshiped in the surrounding culture; the insistence on worshiping only one Lord got the early Christians into a great deal of trouble, particularly where the emperors were concerned), trusting in Him for salvation and affirming the same body of truth (the term can have either meaning), and sharing the same public profession of faith through baptism (certainly a unifying ordinance, since every Christian from every walk of life had made public profession in this way). Furthermore, each Christian is part of the family of God, and thus looks to the same Father, who rules over the entire universe and dwells within each believer individually and in the Church corporately.

GIFTS IN THE BODY (verses 7-13)

Verse 7 - In order to keep the unity of the Body, each Christian must play his part, and is empowered to do so by grace given to each one by Christ.

Verses 8-10 - Paul now digresses briefly to indicate why Christ is able to distribute these munificent gifts of which he speaks. Using a quotation from Psalm 68:18 (in a somewhat obscure form, taken from the Aramaic Targums popularized by the Pharisees under whom Paul had received his education), Paul pictures Christ as a conquering king who returns home with captives in his train and carrying cartloads of plunder, which he then distributes to his subjects. This one who has been raised to the highest place is the same one who descended to the depths of humiliation in His incarnation and crucifixion (any who would seek support in this passage for Christ's supposed descent into Hell must engage in highly creative exegesis). He has ascended in order that He might rule over all things for His own glory, and that of His Father.

Verse 11 - This conquering king gives valuable gifts to His Church indeed - the gifts of gifted men (unlike I Corinthians and Romans, where the spiritual gifts themselves are in view). Some have seen in this verse an allusion to Paul himself, as one of the captives taken by Christ, and in turn given as a gift to His Church. The gifted men are ranked according to the scope of their ministries. Apostles were given to the whole Church - men uniquely fitted and commissioned by God to serve as the foundation of the Church. Like them, prophets, who received direct revelation from God, served more than a single congregation (one might think of Agabus, for instance). These foundational offices passed away with the first generation of the Church and left their legacy behind for all to enjoy in the form of the Scriptures. Evangelists were also gifts to the Church at large, as they preached the Gospel where it had not been heard and occasionally served as emissaries of the apostles. Pastor-teachers, on the other hand (one office, not two, is intended here), served a single congregation; the role described corresponds to that of the elder or bishop.

Verse 12 - The task of these gifted men is not so much to do the work of God as to prepare God's people to do God's work. The outcome of such preparation will be a church where people are built up, growing and maturing in the faith. People are drawn together as they serve one another and work together in service to God.

Verse 13 - What Paul describes here is the ideal, of course, but that does not make it any less worth striving for. While we may never know perfect unity and perfect maturity in Christ until we reach the glories of Heaven, we should nonetheless strive for such unity now.

MATURITY IN THE BODY (verses 14-16)

Verse 14 - Paul's words here are particularly appropriate since he was talking to people who were, for the most part, young Christians (few had been saved for more than five years). Such people have a tendency to be seduced by the sweet-sounding melodies of false teaching and to follow whatever fad is currently popular. Balance and stability come only with maturity. The word translated "cunning" in this verse refers to playing with dice - Paul compares the false teachers who would seduce his readers to the perpetrators of some theological shell game.

Verse 15 - The gifted men given to the Church by Christ can never stoop to such manipulative trickery, however. They must be known for their integrity - men who speak and practice the truth out of love for Christ and His people. Note that truth that is not loving is less than truthful, and love that is not truthful is less than loving. One commentator made the interesting observation that, in a baby, the head is disproportionately large with respect to the body, but as the

child matures, the body “catches up” with the head. While Paul might not have had this in mind, it certainly is an apt analogy for the Church as it “grows up into him who is the Head.”

Verse 16 - Paul closes the section with a picture of a harmoniously-functioning body where each part does its job to contribute to the movement and growth of the organism. This is what the Church should be like.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS X

Ephesians 4:17-32

As Paul continues the application section of the epistle he began in the section we studied last week, we find that he moves increasingly down to the practical level of everyday life. In the beginning of the chapter, he talked about the unity of the Church. He now talks more specifically about the kinds of behavior that foster such unity and contrasts these with the ways of the unbelieving world.

PUT OFF THE OLD, PUT ON THE NEW (verses 17-24)

Verse 17 - When Paul speaks to the (largely Gentile) churches of western Asia Minor, he contrasts them with “the Gentiles” in much the same way he often contrasts his Jewish-Christian readers with “the circumcision.” The Christian, whether Jew or Gentile, is not what he was; he is something new, a third kind of person - one reborn in the image of Jesus Christ. Today’s Christians could learn much about the importance of rejecting the labels the world often uses to divide people and instead identifying themselves as “Christians.”

Verses 18-19 - What Paul says here is a shortened version of the famous passage in Romans 1 where he describes the utter lostness of the pagan world. Paul begins by talking about “the futility of their thinking” - and this of a Gentile world that prided itself for its philosophical sophistication. The fact of the matter is, however, that man-made philosophy will always be futile because its center is in man rather than in God. It will never lead to truth. Instead, it will produce spiritual hardening through the pride of supposed knowledge and moral bankruptcy through the inevitable relativism that results from humanistic presuppositions. Furthermore, those who think this way will never find satisfaction; they will continually lust for more than what they have, whether in the material realm or that of sensual desires.

Verses 20-21 - The Gospel is here contrasted with the entire man-made system of thought that dominated the culture of Paul’s day. It was not human wisdom that led his readers to Christ, but rather the grace of God through the sacrificial death of Christ and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. The result is not ignorance, but truth.

Verses 22-24 - The image of taking off an old piece of clothing and putting on a new one is one of Paul’s favorites, and indeed was a common literary figure in the first-century world. Note that the two parts of the image go together - one cannot put off without also putting on. To do so would not only leave one in a rather awkward situation - naked before the world - but one commentator has remarked that one half of this analogy would be about as useful as half a pair of scissors! Putting off the old self means simply to put away sin; the desires of the old self are described as deceitful because they never deliver what they promise. The renewing of the mind mentioned in verse 23 reminds one of Romans 12:2 - ignorance is now replaced with an enlightened mind that is able to perceive and comprehend the truth as revealed by God in His Son. The new self, on the other hand, is characterized by Christlikeness rather than sin. The new person in Christ is righteous in his dealings with men and holy before God, with a holiness that has come from the spotless robe of Christ Himself. [NOTE: This verse has generated some controversy about the matter of the image of God in man. Some have argued that the image of God was totally destroyed by the Fall, and is

only restored through the work of regeneration (Lutheran), while Reformed theologians believe that the image of God was marred by the Fall, but is in the process of being returned to its pristine glory through the work of Christ in the believer.]

CHARACTER TRAITS OF THE NEW MAN (verses 25-32)

Verse 25 - Paul now gets down to the nitty-gritty of everyday life. What does it *really* mean to put on the new man? For one thing, it means speaking the truth. As is true in our own day, Paul lived in a world where lying was commonly accepted by the rank and file of men. If they had had income taxes, cheating on them would have been commonplace. Truthfulness is particularly important among Christians, who are part of one Body. Nothing destroys unity faster than the distrust that results from lying and deceit. John Chrysostom asked in connection with this verse, “If the eye sees a snake in the road, is it going to lie to the feet?” This is not to suggest, of course, that it is acceptable to lie to unbelievers.

Verses 26-27 - The quotation here is from Psalm 4:4, and, though Paul does not finish the verse, he clearly had the rest of the verse in mind as he continued his application. Anger in itself is not wrong. God gets angry, and so did His Son. Righteous indignation is an appropriate response to wickedness, and the lack of it may show an inordinate fear of man. The anger that is wrong is selfish anger that takes umbrage when things don’t go one’s own way rather than being concerned primarily with the glory of God. Anger is also sinful when it simmers overnight and turns into bitterness, hatred, or a grudge. Anger must be dealt with quickly, because, if left to stew, it becomes an ideal breeding ground for the work of the devil. His poisons can quickly disrupt the unity of the body.

Verse 28 - Petty pilferage was commonplace in Paul’s day, particularly among slaves. The Christian, however, lives by a completely different standard and set of motives. Not only does he replace stealing with honest labor, but his motivation is different - it is no longer to gratify himself, but to be in a position to meet the needs of others.

Verse 29 - Speech also is elevated to a new standard. The gutter talk of common discourse is to be replaced by conversation that adheres to a new standard - benefit for those who hear. If it doesn’t build up, Paul says, don’t say it. Notice that in both of these verses, the “old man - new man” theme is followed. The Christian life does not consist merely of a series of “don’ts.” If that were the case, the best Christian would be the man who says nothing and does nothing. Bad behavior must be replaced, not just removed, and the standard for replacing it is far above that found in the unbelieving world.

Verse 30 - A deeper motivating factor behind these changes that are to be incorporated into the Christian’s life is the presence of the Holy Spirit within. As has often been noted, when one has God as his house-guest, it tends to change his behavior. So should it be with all Christians, whose deepest desire should be to please the Lord who dwells within them.

Verses 31-32 - In one last contrast, Paul exhorts his readers to get rid of the sins of word and deed that stem from the self-centered life. Fits of temper and physical aggression, deep-seated grudges and hatred are all totally inappropriate for the child of God. Instead, grudges should be

replaced by forgiveness, hatred by love, and temper by kindness. The motive Paul uses here is the same one used by Jesus in His parable in Matthew 18:21-35.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS XI

Ephesians 5:1-20; Colossians 3:1-17

The practical exhortations given by Paul in these sections of the epistles are so similar in content that it is best to consider them together rather than consecutively.

GENERAL EXHORTATION TO HOLINESS (Ephesians 5:1-2; Colossians 3:1-4)

Ephesians 5:1-2 - Paul makes what at first seems a rather audacious assertion - that Christians should live like God - but then explains his meaning by speaking of the kind of imitation that causes a child to mimic his father, striving for behavior he can never hope to duplicate, yet doing so with the greatest respect and adoration. Specifically, this means living a life of love as Christ did, with the emphasis on self-sacrifice.

Colossians 3:1-4 - This passage almost seems to blend themes from Ephesians and Colossians. We see the emphasis on Christians being in heavenly places with Christ, so typical of Ephesians, mingled with the theme of the new life in Christ symbolized by baptism that Paul had referred to in Colossians 2. The Colossians are instructed to take their minds off of earthly things (which were such great matters of preoccupation to the false teachers) and concentrate on eternal verities. What is life for the Christian, after all, but Christ Himself?

SINS TO BE AVOIDED (Ephesians 5:3-7; Colossians 3:5-6)

Ephesians 5:3-5; Colossians 3:5-6 - Paul now lists some of the specific sins to be avoided by Christians. The two lists are very similar and concentrate on sexual sins and sins of the tongue. Both point out that such sins are at root idolatrous, since they put the object of lust or the desire for popularity or attention before God, and that people who do such things are subject to God's judgment. Ephesians 5:3 contrasts the fragrant odor of self-sacrifice that should characterize God's child with the noxious whiff of sin that should never be detected on his breath.

Ephesians 5:6-7 - Paul recognizes that immorality can easily be rationalized under the cloak of "freedom" or "toleration," and warns his readers against being seduced by such empty arguments. When he goes on to warn them against being partners with such people, he uses the same word used in 3:6 to describe the new union of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. He is not saying that Christians are not to associate with unbelievers, but that they can never share in their values and lifestyles.

THE OLD AND THE NEW (Ephesians 5:8-14; Colossians 3:7-11)

Ephesians 5:8-10 - Here Paul uses the familiar contrast between darkness and light, but rather than describing his readers as "in darkness" or "in the light," he simply says that they were once darkness, but now they are light. The images penetrate to the very character of the person being described rather than simply illustrating the environment in which he lives. Those who are now light rather than darkness seek to please the Lord, and this involves living in goodness, righteousness, and truth.

Ephesians 5:11-14 - How can the deeds of darkness be exposed if they are not to be mentioned? Simply enough, the evil in the world is to be exposed by contrast with the good. Living in the light will in itself expose the darkness around it. Too often, Christians have succeeded only in drawing more attention to evil by attempting to expose it directly, and even have been drawn into it themselves in the process. It may seem hopelessly old-fashioned and out of date in our era of “openness,” but there really are some things that are not appropriate subjects for conversation and should be left unmentioned. The believer is to bask in the light of Christ rather than go rooting around in the darkness in order to bring its filth to public attention.

Colossians 3:7-8 - To the Colossians, Paul speaks of their former manner of life and uses a very strong term to describe their need to dissociate themselves from the sins of the past. One commentator remarked that what Paul describes is like a machinist who gets his hand caught in a press and must take an axe to his hand in order to avoid having his whole body crushed in the machine. The amputation is painful, yet necessary for the preservation of life.

Colossians 3:9-10 - The language here is similar to that of Ephesians 4, with its image of putting off and putting on, and the restoration of the image of God in all its righteousness.

Colossians 3:11 - What Paul says here is reminiscent of Galatians 3:28, the point being that as Christ fills the lives of all His people, the differences between them become insignificant and cease to divide.

VIRTUES TO BE PRACTICED (Ephesians 5:15-20; Colossians 3:12-17)

Colossians 3:12-15 - The wording here is similar to Ephesians 4:32-5:2, with its emphasis on forgiveness and love. Verse 15 pictures the peace of Christ serving as an umpire or arbiter to solve disputes among the people of God. Peace and gratitude are to overrule any petty sources of contention in the church.

Ephesians 5:15-17 - Here Paul contrasts wisdom and foolishness, with the former requiring discerning the times as well as the will of God. The wise man will waste no opportunity to live righteously in this dark world, and will guide his life by the will of God rather than the values of the age.

Ephesians 5:18 - Drunkenness, then as now, was a problem, and Paul again raises the standard to a higher level. The Christian’s goal is not merely sobriety, but being filled with the Spirit. The child of God is to be “under the influence” in one sense only. It is also worth noting that Paul is not advocating something that is new to his readers or beyond their experience, nor is he advocating a one-time “second blessing.” The verb used implies continual action. Christians should continually seek the Spirit’s filling for daily living, not as an entree to a higher level of spirituality.

Ephesians 5:19-20; Colossians 3:16 - Paul speaks in both letters of the edifying power of worship. As Christians sing praises to the Lord, they also uplift one another. Thanksgiving acknowledges the grace of God while lifting up the one who offers the praise. Colossians 3:16 notes that the Word of God is to be the source of praise, while both passages speak of the richness of Christian hymnody, both in the first century and today.

Colossians 3:17 - What more appropriate summary of Paul's moral exhortations could we find than this verse? All things are to be done in Christ's name, to God's glory, and with thanksgiving. May it be so of us.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS XII

Ephesians 5:21-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1

Today we arrive at the well-known passages in Ephesians and Colossians dealing with common interpersonal relationships. It is worth noting that, while these instructions may be very familiar to us, they were revolutionary in the first century. The notion of reciprocal responsibilities among privileged people like husbands, fathers, and masters and the “un-persons” who were wives, children, and slaves was unthinkable in the Graeco-Roman world. Feminists may criticize Christianity for being patriarchal, but they would be in no position to criticize anything were it not for the equality fostered by teachings such as those found in these passages. As was the case last week, the passages cover so much of the same ground that we will look at them concurrently.

WIVES AND HUSBANDS (Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-19)

Ephesians 5:21 states the basic theme for the entire passage - mutual submission. As already indicated, this was a revolutionary concept. Several points should be noted.

First of all, the duties laid out in these passages are placed in the context of submission to Christ. Those in authority are to be respected and obeyed, and those under authority are to be treated lovingly and justly, because all alike are accountable to God for their behavior and have Him to thank for their respective positions.

Secondly, these instructions are addressed to believers, and concern primarily relationships among Christians. Unquestionably many of the women in the congregations had unbelieving husbands, and certainly many of the slaves had non-Christian masters, but Paul here does not address the conflicts that arise when the commands of men go against the Word of God. The entire tone of these passages is one of mutuality.

Thirdly, the fact that those deemed inferiors in first-century culture are always addressed first could indicate a number of things - either that the congregations to whom Paul wrote were made up primarily of such people (possible with women, probable with slaves, but doubtful with children); that Paul wished to challenge the protocol of his society by addressing such people first, or even by addressing them at all; or that Paul wanted to give greater impact to his instructions to husbands, fathers, and masters, and did so by addressing them last.

Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18 - In Paul's words to wives, he emphasizes submission, and in doing so places husbands on an incredibly high pedestal. He does this by introducing his well-known analogy between husband-wife relationships and Christ's position with regard to the Church. In the same way that Christ is the direction-giver, sustainer, and protector of the Church, so the husband is to be to the wife. As the Church lovingly submits to the direction of its Head, so the wife submits to the authority of her husband. Such words, of course, would have been readily heard by people in the first century; it is the words that follow that would have sounded strange to their ears.

In addressing husbands, who in the Roman world had complete freedom in their conduct toward their wives, Paul moves away from his focus on the Lordship of Christ to concentrate on His

loving sacrifice on behalf of His Church. While Colossians 3:19 summarizes the point in a single sentence, telling the husband to love his wife and not treat her harshly, in Ephesians Paul launches into a much fuller development of the Christ-husband analogy.

In Ephesians 5:25-27, he makes the point that the sacrificial attitude of Christ was for the purpose of sanctifying and purifying the Church. Among other things, this certainly implies that the husband bears responsibility for the spiritual growth of his wife. How is this responsibility to be undertaken?

In verses 28-30, Paul continues with the imagery of the body, noting that, since one does not voluntarily harm his own body, but feeds it and keeps it warm, so husbands should see to the needs of their wives, since they have become one flesh. He follows this up in verse 31 by quoting the seminal verse on marriage from Genesis 2:24.

In verse 32, Paul dignifies his analogy by categorizing it as a mystery - a truth that has been revealed by God in these last days. It unquestionably elevates and dignifies the institution of marriage beyond its prior level, though it does not, as taught by Catholics (the Vulgate translates the Greek word *mysterion* by the Latin *sacramentum*), raise it to the level of a sacrament of the Church. He then summarizes his point in verse 33; it should not be thought that wives need not love their husbands, but simply that their love is to display itself in respect and submission, as the husband's is to display itself in sacrifice. [NOTE: Some have pointed out that this verse addresses the greatest challenges faced by husbands and wives in the light of the curse in Genesis 3:16; sin drives the wife to seek to dominate her husband instead of respecting him, while it drives the man toward tyranny over his wife rather than sacrificial love.]

CHILDREN AND PARENTS (Ephesians 6:1-4; Colossians 3:20-21)

Paul first addresses children in Ephesians 6:1-3 and Colossians 3:20. This is unusual first of all because children were addressed at all. They obviously were part of the first-century churches and were expected by Paul to recognize their Christian duties. The chief among these was the duty to obey their parents, as outlined in the Fifth Commandment of the Decalogue. They do this not because their parents are perfect, but because it is the right thing to do and because it pleases the Lord. In Ephesians 6:2-3, Paul again turns to the Scriptures to substantiate his instructions, while Colossians 3:20 emphasizes the universality of the command (again, noting that Paul assumes that parents and children alike are believers). The promise at the end of the Fifth Commandment is problematic, but whether it refers to eternal life in Heaven or to an improved quality and span of life on earth, the fact remains that children reap the consequences of their treatment of their parents.

Again, the Roman world knew nothing of obligations of fathers to children - fathers had the right to order children exposed to the elements at birth if they did not please them. Paul, however, sets forth the duties of fathers (mothers are not excluded, but the father, as the head of the family, is ultimately responsible for child-rearing) in Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21. These duties are expressed in both negative and positive terms. Fathers are not to exasperate or embitter their children by over-parenting, nagging, or being so strict that their children's development is frustrated and they lose heart and become convinced that they never will be able to do anything to please the parents (after all, how often has God expressed pleasure with His children despite the fact that they

fall far short of His standard of perfection?). Positively, fathers are to discipline and instruct their children, guiding their development and, as with wives, contributing to their sanctification.

SLAVES AND MASTERS (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1)

Paul addresses slaves, who would have made up a significant portion of the receiving churches, in Ephesians 6:5-8 and Colossians 3:22-25. It is worth noting that, while marriage and parenthood are given scriptural support in Paul's instructions, we find no such support for the institution of slavery. While Paul does not explicitly condemn it, his teaching that slaves and masters are equal, and equally accountable, before God struck the first blow that ultimately brought the institution tumbling to the ground in the nineteenth century.

In Ephesians 6:5-6 and Colossians 3:22, Paul emphasizes the responsibility for the slave to respect his master because of his love for God. If God is his true Master, he will serve his earthly master sincerely and work hard even when his master is not looking.

In Ephesians 6:7-8 and Colossians 3:23-25, Paul encourages slaves to work as if they were working for the Lord, knowing that God would reward them for their deeds. It is interesting to note that, while both epistles speak of reward from God for a job well done, Colossians also indicates that God will punish those who are not faithful in their labors. An unjust job situation does not justify less than excellent effort on the part of the believer.

Paul then turns to masters in Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1. He emphasizes that masters are subject to the same standard as slaves - namely, that they are serving God and will be judged by Him. Ephesians expresses the consequences of this negatively - masters should not threaten or mistreat their slaves - while Colossians puts things in a positive light by saying that the master should treat his slaves fairly and justly. It has often been noted that, if such standards were followed explicitly, slavery would become economically unfeasible and would quickly disappear. It is to the shame of the Christian Church that it took almost 2000 years for this to happen.

EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS XIII

Ephesians 6:10-24; Colossians 4:2-18

Today we arrive at the concluding exhortations and greetings of the two epistles. We will direct most of our attention toward Paul's stirring military metaphor in Ephesians 6.

THE CHRISTIAN'S ARMOR (Ephesians 6:10-18)

The main point to be derived from this section is that Christians are to edify one another, not for their own sake, but to fit them for battle against the enemy. Many commentators have suggested that Paul's model for this extended metaphor was the Roman guard to whom he was chained during his imprisonment.

Verse 10 - The same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead (1:19) and saved Paul from eternal damnation (3:7) is the power that equips the Christian to fight the foe. Many have noted the similarity between Paul's exhortation here and the oft-repeated words of God to Joshua. The Christian can be strong because his power is God's, not his own, and because the victory has already been assured.

Verses 11-12 - The Christian's battle is not against difficult circumstances, but against spiritual powers. It is noteworthy that the words Paul uses here include not only the supposed angelic powers venerated by the Gnostics, but also pagan deities ("powers of this dark world" is a word sometimes applied to a sun god; Paul uses it here with delicious irony) and the "spiritual forces" thought by astrologers to govern the lives of men.

Verse 13 - The defensive armor God provides not only enables the believer to stand firm during the battle, but to remain standing after it is over. The "day of evil," of course, is the age in which we now live.

Verses 14-17 - Paul now develops his analogy with reference to specific pieces of armor worn by Roman soldiers.

- The belt not only kept the short tunic out of the way during hand-to-hand fighting, but also held the other pieces of armor in place. Truth holds everything else together, and without it the Christian's defenses are easily penetrated, rendering him *hors de combat*.
- The breastplate, made of bronze or chain mail, covered both front and back from neck to thighs and was the main protector of the heart. The righteousness of Christ by which the Christian is justified protects him from any mortal wound.
- Roman army shoes were tough boots with large spikes protruding from the bottom, allowing the soldier to march with sure-footed speed in even the worst terrain. The Christian warrior's foundation is solid because he has peace with God, allowing him to be ready for battle at all times.
- The shield was used both in mass formations (the famous Roman phalanx) and in individual combat, and could protect against blows from sword or spear, as well as from arrows and flaming darts shot by opponents. The Christian's confidence in God allows him to turn aside any temptations or accusations hurled at him by the accuser of the brethren.

- The sword is the only offensive weapon Paul mentions, though Roman soldiers also used spears and bows in their warfare. The Christian here is to follow the example of Christ, who used the Word of God to great effect in His combat against Satan in the wilderness. All too often, Christians have so little knowledge of the Word that they are unable to use it to fend off temptations; many also spend more time defending it than using it.

Verse 18 - The warrior must always be alert. Though prayer is not a weapon or a piece of armor in Paul's analogy, it keeps the Christian aware of what is going on around him. He is in constant touch with his Commander and continually alert to the stratagems of the enemy. Prayer is also a way in which warriors can uphold one another.

CLOSING EXHORTATIONS (Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:2-6)

Ephesians 6:19-20 and Colossians 4:2-4 are very similar. In both passages, Paul encourages his readers to pray for him. His specific needs at this time are for an opportunity to preach the Gospel and boldness to take advantage of it when it comes. He hoped to appear before Caesar to give testimony of his faith. We do not know whether he had that opportunity or not, but it was clearly his desire when he wrote these letters.

In Colossians 4:5-6, Paul exhorts the Colossians to look for the same things he is seeking - opportunities to spread the Gospel and wisdom to take advantage of them properly when they come. His words carry both positive and negative implications; his readers must be careful not to damage the reputation of Christ by their behavior or their words, especially in the light of the slanders being spread about the faith at this time.

PERSONAL GREETINGS (Ephesians 6:21-24; Colossians 4:7-18)

Not surprisingly, considering that Ephesians was a circular letter, the personal references at the close of the epistle are few. In fact, the only one Paul includes is a commendation for the bearer of the epistle, Tychicus, in words virtually identical to those found in Colossians (Ephesians 6:21-22 cf. Colossians 4:7-8).

Colossians includes many more personal notes, including a commendation of the converted runaway slave Onesimus (verse 9), who carried with him on his return the letter to Philemon. Paul sends greetings from those with him in Rome, including Aristarchus (a Thessalonian arrested during the riot in Ephesus), Mark (who had now been restored after a rocky first attempt at ministry), Justus (these were the only Jews who served with Paul in Rome; he obviously missed the company of his fellow-countrymen), Epaphras (the founder of the Colossian church, who is described as continually in prayer for his friends at home; Paul assures his readers that their pastor is not on vacation in Rome), Luke (this passage tells us almost everything we know about the author of the third Gospel), and Demas (who later forsook Paul because of the enticements of the world).

Paul then sends greetings to the Christians in Laodicea, and to Nympha, apparently a woman in whose home the Laodicean church met. The Colossian and Laodicean churches are then instructed to exchange letters. Some have speculated that the Laodicean epistle mentioned here is

the circular letter we know as Ephesians. While this is certainly possible, it is also possible that the letter to Laodicea has not survived the centuries.

In Colossians 4:17, Paul exhorts Archippus to complete the work to which God had called him. Archippus is also mentioned in Philemon and appears to have been one of the spiritual leaders of the Colossian church (possibly even Philemon's son). Perhaps he was assuming leadership responsibilities in the absence of Epaphras. Paul's words need not imply rebuke, and could indeed convey support for the young man as he carried out his responsibilities in the congregation.

Both epistles conclude with fairly typical Pauline closings (Ephesians 6:23-24; Colossians 4:18), conveying his desire that the grace of God be the experience of his readers.