

## STRATEGY, ONESIMUS, AND GNOSTICISM

Paul's pattern (strategy), I hope most of you know, was to start with the Jewish community, preach in the synagogue, take whatever group of Jews responded to the Message, and go from there. The only town Paul visited that had no synagogue (as far as we know) was Philippi. In Philippi, Paul and Silas went "down by the riverside," knowing that if there were any Jews in the area, that is where they would gather on the Sabbath. Sure enough, Lydia and a few others were there. But the question is, "Were there any Jews in Colossae?" There was no synagogue in Philippi, but that was in Macedonia. Colossae was across the Aegean Sea and a hundred miles inland.

For a while some scholars were wondering if Paul was mostly concerned about the pagan influences at Colossae. Was that what Paul was warning the new Christians to be wary about? The "mystery cults" were powerful and influential in the Roman Empire of the time. Spiritual awakening and transformation were claimed and taught in the cult of Mithras and the cult of Isis (and others) with elaborate rituals and powerful symbols. Parallels to Christian baptism, the communion celebration, and beliefs about death and rebirth have often been noted. Many have wondered if there was cross-pollination going on in some way that we can no longer track.

The Gnostic movements which became the great heresies in the second, third, and fourth centuries were already developing. Scholars used to think that Gnostic groups were not evident except in embryo form until sometime after the first century A.D. But it has since become clear that they were in formation and growing for at least a hundred years before Jesus. Gnostic forms of Judaism were also growing, especially in the diaspora. It seems clear now that the Essenes were an early Gnostic Jewish sect. For a time, Paul's warnings to the Colossian Christians about such things were causing some scholars to doubt Paul's authorship, and to place the Colossian letter at a date well after Paul's death. They did not think that Gnostic influences could have been developed so well in Paul's lifetime. That is no longer defensible, and in fact strong cases can now be made (by N.T. Wright, for instance) that the Colossian letter was a warning against Jewish influence entirely, as was the case with the letter to the Galatians. (N.T. Wright does not stand for "New Testament" Wright, by the way, but for Nicholas Thomas Wright, in case you have wondered.)

Some of the assumptions for scholars' earlier theories about what might have been going on were based on the location of Colossae. That is, the Colossian church was obviously located far away from Israel, and deep in Hellenistic territory. It's easy to assume that Greek and Roman culture must have been the dominant factor in most Asian cities, and therefore that must have been what the Apostle Paul was concerned about – the influence of the pagan world on the early Christians at Colossae. And the members of that church must have started out as pagans themselves, yes? Hence Paul was warning them against returning to their pagan ways.

So back to where we started: Paul's strategy wherever he went was to go first to the synagogue. There, as a visiting rabbi, he would be asked to preach. He would preach about Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism, claiming the resurrection as proof and his own experiences as certain evidence. Those who believed what Paul was preaching would form the new "Christian" church in that area. And of course those who were not persuaded would become the opposition. In short, the synagogue would split, and that would understandably cause anger and opposition.

But then we are told that Paul never visited Colossae – that Epaphras started the church there. And that if there was a synagogue in Colossae, it must have been quite small, which means the opposition must have been fairly small as well. Jewish influence may even have been of no consequence to the church at Colossae. Therefore the issues would have been between the new Christians and the pagan culture surrounding them.

Well, modern biblical scholarship is not fifty years old; it is two hundred years old. As an aside, Jesus was a "modern biblical scholar" in many ways. *"It was said to you by the men of old ... but I say to you ...."* In any case, a truly exceptional biblical scholar was J.B. Lightfoot (Joseph Barber Lightfoot, April 13, 1828 to December 21, 1889.) Long ago, tracking Josephus and some tax records from Laodicea, Lightfoot told us that the Jewish population of the region (Laodicea and the Lycus River Valley) at the time of Paul was far greater than we were imagining. Antiochus III (King of the Seleucid Empire) had transported two thousand Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia to Lydia and Phrygia. That would have been in roughly 200 B.C. [It was not Antiochus the Great, but his son, Antiochus IV, who hated the Jews and ended up with the Maccabean Revolt on his hands.] This was not a deportation of punishment, but in all probability a grateful reward for faithful service.

In any case, “two thousand families” would probably mean eight or nine thousand Jews moving into the region. In addition, tax records of the time (twenty pounds of gold from the Jews of Laodicea) suggest that, at half a shekel per every Jewish male, there were eleven thousand Jewish adult freemen in the Laodicean area in the middle of the first century A.D. This does not count women, children, or slaves. Suddenly our picture of the situation at Colossae is very different. With something like thirty to forty thousand Jews in the Lycus River Valley, there is every reason to suspect that the church at Colossae was made up of Jewish converts and converts from the so-called “god-fearers” – pagans who were attracted to Judaism, and who came to the synagogue to hear the teachings even if they had not fully converted. In other words, the situation at Colossae (and Laodicea) was not very different from the situation in the Galatian churches. And in all probability, the Jewish population was even greater in Phrygia than it was in Galatia.

So let me tell you the story once again, my favorite version: In approximately 52 A.D., the Apostle Paul came walking across what we call Turkey. This time he knew where he was going – to Ephesus, the greatest city in Asia Minor. Paul had learned that if you start a church in a major city, it will spread to all the surrounding territory. If you start a church in a small town, it costs the same amount of effort and controversy, but the influence is that of only one small town.

Wanting to get to Ephesus, Paul was coming from Syrian Antioch (his home church) through Tarsus (his home town) and then through the region of Galatia, where he had started churches on his first missionary journey several years before. He wanted to see how they were doing. This brought him through Lystra and Pisidian Antioch. Now, many will tell you that Paul was never in Colossae personally. They base that on Colossians 2:1: *“I want you to know how strenuous are my exertions for you and the Laodiceans, and for all who have never set eyes on me (all who have never seen my face).”* Why is it so easily supposed that there is only one way to hear this comment, and that it means Paul had never visited Colossae?

It seems to me that Paul was always concerned about all the people he was not reaching. It seems like he was always planning to travel to places where he had not yet been. So this comment about those “who have never set eyes on me” could easily mean all the people in Colossae and Laodicea and Hierapolis who had not yet heard the Message. It could just as easily mean all the people in Asia Minor whom he had not yet visited, or even all the people in the entire Roman Empire whom he had

not yet preached to. But how can anybody be sure it means he had not seen *anybody* in Colossae? I was a pastor in Corona del Mar, California for ten years, but lots of people in the area had never seen my face. And a few months after I left, there were even members of the *church* who had never seen my face. Yet numerous commentaries use this single verse as proof that Paul had never been to Colossae.

It seems to me that some scholars have learned Greek pretty well but have never paid much attention to the ancient maps. In Paul's time, there is no reasonable way to get from Pisidian Antioch to Ephesus without going through Colossae. Colossae and Laodicea were on the major east-west highway that ran through the middle of Phrygia and Lydia from Ephesus to Pisidian Antioch.

Anyway, we know Paul was eager to get to Ephesus. But his Porsche had broken down, so he had to walk. He also had to stop from time to time to replenish supplies. That often meant setting up shop as a tent-maker, purchasing supplies, getting an order, making something someone wanted out of canvas – meaning, made from woven goat hair. And of course this meant talking in the marketplace as he worked, with whoever else was working or buying or selling there. So our notions of the pace of travel are hard to imagine in comparison to real life in Paul's time. What we think took a day probably often took a week or two. Nobody had a wristwatch. Nobody had ever seen a calendar as we think of it. "Time" was certainly a concept and a limitation, but the kind of fixation and precision that we all associate with time had not yet occurred to the ancient world in which Paul lived.

As an illustration: Fearing for his life, Silas and Timothy sent Paul out of Berea to Athens. (Acts 17:14) Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea a little longer to strengthen the new church that had just been founded there. Paul requested Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens as soon as possible. What do you think? Ten o'clock in the morning, five days from now, in Athens? Acts 18:5 tells us that Silas and Timothy caught up with Paul not in Athens, but in Corinth. My hunch is that it was at least two months later. And they weren't late. You get there when you get there.

So Paul would have walked through Colossae and Laodicea on the way to Ephesus. Colossae had been a far more prominent city in the fifth century B.C. It would still have been a welcome sight after many miles of open country. Paul would not have had any intention of starting a church in Colossae, or even in the now more prominent Laodicea about twelve miles to the west – another day's walk. So Paul would have

refrained from preaching in the synagogue at Colossae. He did not want to get involved in the usual manner. But that does not mean he talked to nobody, or that he kept entirely quiet about the things he cared about most. So he had conversations with many people, and one of the new friends he made was a man named Philemon.

Since I'm telling this story: Paul and Philemon talked a number of times, and Philemon became so interested in what Paul had to say that he invited Paul to his house on more than one evening after work. And there his slave Onesimus was also enthralled at some of the things Paul was saying. Freedom in Christ Jesus, no matter what the world thought about it – was that real? So Paul did not start a church in Colossae, but he sowed many seeds. And he did the same thing in Laodicea not long afterward. Then he went on to Ephesus, as he intended. And there Paul had his longest, and in many ways the most fruitful, ministry of his career.

Some months later, when the seeds of what Paul had talked about had had time to germinate for a while, Onesimus decided to run away and find Paul in Ephesus. To him, his life seemed closed down and without any future. Onesimus was both a brilliant and a gifted human being. It began to seem to him like it was worth any risk to find Paul again, and to find out where this New Life Paul had talked about might really lead.

It's no easy task to find one man in a city the size of Ephesus. But when Onesimus finally tracked him down, Paul was himself in prison. At first this seemed to Onesimus like a total disaster. But he soon discovered that Paul was not nearly as dismayed about it as he was himself. That's when Onesimus began to realize that Paul's Message was not just theory or make-believe. Here was a man who really lived the New Life no matter what the world did about it or thought about it. And so the bond of friendship between Paul and Onesimus began to grow strong and real ... until one day Onesimus realized that he also could have this New Life, no matter what the world thought about it or did about it. It was so real, in fact, that Onesimus could face whatever might happen to him – even the ordeal of going back to face his old master in Colossae.

The rest is more than story. Onesimus did just that. With another friend, Tychicus, he carried letters from Paul to Laodicea and Colossae. One of them was to his old master, Philemon. And so Onesimus and Philemon also became friends – true and authentic friends in Christ Jesus. Philemon freed Onesimus and sent him back to Ephesus to help Paul, if he could. Years later, Onesimus, now a long-time respected member of the Christian church in Ephesus, became Bishop of the entire

region. And he was still friends with Philemon. One day, long after Paul had been executed in Rome, Onesimus asked Philemon if it wouldn't be a good idea to see how many of Paul's old letters they could find. It would take a lot of time and mean quite a bit of travel, but Onesimus was too busy with all his other responsibilities as Bishop. So with letters of authority from the Bishop of Ephesus, Philemon undertook the task and retraced Paul's steps to as many places as he could discover. Hence we now have in our New Testament the letters of Paul to: the Galatians, the Ephesians, the Colossians, the Philippians, the Thessalonians (2), the Corinthians (2), the Romans, and fragments of two letters to Timothy and maybe one to Titus.

One letter Philemon did not have to track down. He just pulled it out of his own desk. It was addressed to him, Philemon ... the only personal letter in the collection.

Paul must have written many other letters that Philemon could not find, and letters to many individuals that there was no way to trace. But still, we are incredibly grateful for the ones he did find and save for us, now comprising approximately one-third of our New Testament.

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Increasingly, our best (in my opinion) and most recent New Testament scholars are suspecting that Paul was concerned almost entirely with Jewish influences at Colossae, and therefore with Jewish Gnostic tendencies. If they are correct, then Colossians and Galatians are more like twin letters: both are concerned with Jewish influences trying to minimize the Christian claims, and trying to say that it's fine to be a Christian second, as long as you are Jewish first. That is, it's nice to learn from and believe in Jesus, but only if Moses remains the true and solid foundation. So if you were a Gentile and wanted to follow Christ, it was first necessary to convert to Judaism. Is it not fascinating that Paul, a deeply convinced and committed Jew – who knew Jesus to be Jewish, even the Messiah and the fulfillment of Judaism – would fight this rather logical conclusion tooth and nail all of his days and at considerable personal risk, thus losing many friends and supporters which he badly needed? A sudden unexpected turn that few of us would have imagined, except that it is now so familiar.

When I was in college (University of Redlands), a fellow named Fred Francis was one of the guys in the group of close friends I ran around with. Fred died young, but before he died he ended up being

a pretty well-known and well-respected New Testament scholar. His specialty was Colossians. I still have quite a bit of his material on Colossians, some of it published, some not. A lot of scholarly water has gone under the bridge since Fred's day, but I still find him quoted in articles and commentaries today. At the time he wrote, the pendulum was swinging from an almost total emphasis on pagan influences and mystery-cult perspectives (Osiris, Mithraism), back toward the view that Jewish influences were still very important in Colossae at the time of Paul. Fred saw the situation at Colossae as being something of a balance between the two perspectives – with the church caught in the middle, and needing to find and keep its Christian perspective. Since that time, the pendulum, for the most part, has continued to swing toward the view that Jewish influence was Paul's primary concern in the Colossian letter.

This at least makes it plausible to think that the church in Colossae, as in every other young church that Paul was instrumental in starting, came out of Jewish roots (believing that Jesus and His movement was a fulfillment of Judaism) and struggled against being dragged back into a Jewish perspective that either rejected Jesus or saw Him as an important but secondary addition tacked on to more important Jewish foundations.

But Judaism away from Jerusalem (and Israel) was still more influenced by the culture and settings in which it lived than was true “back home” in Jerusalem, where Judaism ruled more completely. Such things do not have clear or well-defined borders. So from the comments in Colossians, we surmise that Paul was concerned about the influence of a kind of Jewish Gnostic influence that he thought was corrupting the church in Colossae.

The emphasis on angels (which Paul believed in, but not in the same manner) and concerns about ascetic practices (extreme spiritual disciplines) were obscuring the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus (and His Holy Spirit) and undermining the confidence and trust that Paul saw as central and essential to experiencing and living the Christian WAY.

Most of you have at least heard the term “Gnostic,” or “Gnosticism.” Some of you, I suspect, know quite a bit about it. Lots of people in our time (from respected scholars to New Age teachers to studious laypeople) are thinking the church may have made a big mistake putting Gnosticism into the category of a heresy. It is said that heresies never die; they just wait a while and then circle back around in some new guise or form. That is certainly true of Gnosticism in our time and in many places

today, both inside and outside of the church. Gnosticism is prominent and growing, and perhaps winning back all the territory it lost in the fourth century, plus gaining a lot more besides.

- Gnosis versus faith.  
Knowledge versus trust.
- Self-confidence versus dependence on Jesus (Christ) and His Holy Spirit.
- American Way versus Christian Way.  
Self-reliance versus God’s mercy and grace.

Idolatry has always been an issue, and it has far more dimensions to it than most people realize.

Perhaps comments and details about Gnosticism seem really boring to many people – unless we stop to ask about parallels in our own time. What are some of the Gnostic flavors of our time?

- Education is good. But will it save us?
- Information is the “holy cow” of our time (Aquarian Age). But will it save us?
- Syncretism – inclusivity; all religions are equal; Jesus is fine, but never prominent above all others as Savior, Messiah, Christos.

Can you name any of the Gnostic groups or organizations that are prominent and successful today? Where are you with such issues and influences?

If your children were Gnostic (in actual fact, if not in name), would that concern you?

If the church you belong to goes Gnostic, would that concern you? (Many churches have, and it often seems that no one even notices.)

And that leads us deeper into the Colossian study: What are “powers”? What are “thrones”? Do you ever feel concern about the elemental forces all around you? What do you think about “Christ in you, the hope of glory”? (Many Gnostics consider this a rallying cry.)