



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Colossians 1:1-2

"The Colossian Epistle - Why?"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] I don't know why you have to keep making that announcement to remember to turn your clocks forward. Believers Chapel will never forget. [Laughter] Many years ago, when I was studying in Scotland for a term or so, one of the preachers collected a number of sayings that newspapers had put in their paper that preachers had said that were cases in which the individuals had made some simple little mistake, but the result was very humorous.

I remember one of them was, in the days in which, on Monday there would be a brief report on what the well known ministers in the community had preached on the day before, and one of them was to make the announcement that the preacher had preached in the morning and in the evening. It said, "The Reverend Dr. so and so preached bosh in the morning and in the evening," instead of both. [Laughter] There were a lot of little things like that that James Stewart, who was my instructor, had collected. But one of them, I particularly remember, had to do with the Epistle to the Colossians. There was one preacher, one morning, who stood up, and he was going through Colossians, and so, he said to the audience something like this, "Will you please turn in your Bibles to the Epistle of Paul, the colossal to the apossians. [Laughter] And so this morning I want you

to turn to "the Epistle of Paul, the colossal to the apossians," except it's to the Colossians, but Paul is Paul the colossal in one sense at least.

We are going to, the Lord willing, have a series of studies in the Epistle of the Colossians, and it is proper for us to have a brief introduction to it, and that's what we will devote ourselves to, primarily, this morning. We're reading for our Scripture reading, simply, the first two verses of the epistle. Occasionally people fail to note, since it's so common to read an introduction, a salutation like this, that there are some significant truths that are found in these many salutations of the New Testament. And this one is no exception,

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colossae: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Now if you happen to have a Bible that is in modern English, you probably notice that verse 2 concludes with simply, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father." And the words, "And the Lord Jesus Christ," are not found in them. Some of the Greek manuscripts do have, "And the Lord Jesus Christ," that's the reason that we have them in the Authorized Version. But probably, they are not original, and we should simply stop with, "From God our Father." Some scribes, seeking to have some uniformity and realizing that it was common for Paul to write the other way, added those words thinking that they had probably been overlooked by a previous scribe. But the truth that is expressed by, "From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," as one who dispenses grace and peace, is a biblical truth stated many times in the New Testament. It is not necessary for us to have those words to have that truth.

May the Lord bless this reading of his word. Let's bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we give Thee thanks and praise for the word of God, and we thank Thee for this marvelous little letter that the apostle wrote to the church in Colossae. We thank Thee for the way in which it unfolds the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that in our day, so many centuries later, we may learn the truths that the apostle hoped that the saints, who met in Philemon's house, might learn in his day. Enable us to treat it as an epistle to us, and to us individually as well. May we learn from it. May we profit from it.

We give Thee thanks for the privilege of approaching Thee through the Lord Jesus Christ and bringing to Thee the petitions of our hearts.

We ask Thy blessing upon this country in these critical days. We pray for our President. We thank Thee for him. We ask, Lord, that Thou will give him wisdom and guidance and courage and perseverance in the things that are right and wisdom to change in the things that are wrong.

We thank Thee and praise Thee for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we ask Thy blessing, Lord, upon that body. We thank Thee for each local manifestation in which the word of God is proclaimed and in which Christ is honored, strengthen us and build us up, and give us, if it should please Thee, a fruitful ministry for the Lord Jesus Christ in our age and day. We pray for Believers Chapel. We ask Thy blessing upon our elders and deacons and upon the ministry, the outreach, the staff, the people who carry on the work. And the individuals who are members of the chapel, we pray Thy blessing upon them and upon their families and upon their concerns. For those who are ill or sick or who have difficult trials to face, we especially remember them. We commit them to Thee.

We thank Thee, Lord, for all of the blessings that are ours through Jesus Christ. Enable us to appreciate them, to revel in them, and through them, to glorify Thy name.

In nineteen eighty-six, Lord, enable us, as a body and as individuals, to witness for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ in a way that will glorify Thy name.

We commit our meetings of this day to Thee. We ask Thy blessing upon each one of them, and especially, Lord, upon those who are here as visitors, in the various meetings, may they be strengthened and encouraged in the things of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray in his name. Amen.

[Message] One of the things that we who preach have to contend with is the fact that in the Bible just as most of the experiences of life, there are things that one might call technical, and sometimes we're not really too anxious to learn about things that might require us to acquire the meaning of a technical term. And today when we think about Paul's letter to the Colossians, there are going to be two or three things that I will mention in the introduction that are technical terms that express some aspect of the life and philosophy of the people of Paul's day and of the Colossians experience that we have to mention in order to understand the epistle just a little bit better.

This past week in my heavy reading of the comic page, [Laughter] there was a nice little cartoon that I enjoyed for the very reason that often people will say, "Well that term just escaped me," or "I find that very difficult to understand." But in BC Peter has this rock out and he's leaning on it, and on it are the words, "Peter's Plumbing Shop." And BC comes up and he says to Peter, who's the proprietor of Peter's Plumbing Shop, and he says, "I need a tee trap union, a four inch reducer, and a threaded nipple valve, and a catalytic conversion kit." And Peter, the proprietor says, "Would you mind putting that into layman's language?" [Laughter] Well, I appreciated that very much because there are some things that can only be expressed that way. I don't know anything. I don't know the meaning of any of those terms that he asked about there, but I'm sure that they are giving those names for some reason that a plumber might understand. If not Peter the plumber, some other plumber would probably understand.

We want to, over the next few times that I have the privilege of addressing you, to give an exposition of Paul's letter to the Colossians. In fact, a little over twenty years ago, I wrote a commentary on the Greek text of the Epistle to the Colossians, and I don't think since that time I have ever taught through the epistle. So it's probably about time that I do it again, or at least attempt to do it. One might legitimately ask, "Why expound Colossians? Is it an edifying epistle? Is it because it's a timely epistle? Is it therapeutic? Is it a kind of epistle that will be properly corrective and aid us in our Christian life?"

We know this about the little city of Colossae which was a much more significant place in Paul's day than it was a little bit later. And, in fact, it had been a much more important city before Paul's time, but we know this much about the city, that without doubt, Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of Paul is addressed. So as far as a church was concerned, it was not a very important church. From what we know of it, the believers met in the house of Philemon, a person to whom Paul addressed one of his short letters when he was in prison in Rome. So, from that standpoint, you might legitimately ask, "Why expound Colossians?" One way to find an answer is to ask a further question. "Why did Paul think the Colossians needed what he wrote to them in this short epistle of four chapters?" Surely the apostle thought, or at least the Colossians thought, that they would have understood the religious twaddle of the day. They were exposed to a lot of it. And you would think that being exposed to a lot of it, in a relatively small community, that they would have understood some of the things that the people were saying. But nevertheless, in spite of the fact that the apostle probably thought they understood something of the things that were being said, he felt it necessary to write this epistle.

One, I guess, would ask the question too, "What was it that was so appealing about the false teaching that the Colossians were exposed to that caused them to be, or caused it to appeal to them?" And when you read through the epistle, for that's the only way you can answer a question like that, you notice that they were offered a kind of

spiritual fullness, to use the term that the apostle uses. For example, in the 1st chapter and in the 19th verse, we read, "For it pleased the Father that in him," that is in Christ, "Should all fullness dwell." And then in chapter 2 and verse 9, again he uses the term, "For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." And he goes on to play on that same root word by adding, "And you are complete in him," or literally, "You are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power."

So they were offered some kind of fullness, evidently, because the apostle wanted to counter it by saying, "No, in Christ, you have all fullness." Well that's very contemporary. Actually, that's what a lot of people like to do today. They like to say, "You have gone along fairly well in the Christian life to this point, but now you must let us finish it off for you." We notice that, primarily, in a church like the Roman Catholic church, which in many aspects has orthodox teaching as a part of its teaching. On the person of Christ, generally sound, not entirely on the work of Christ, but when it comes to sacramentalism, that's another matter. They might just as well say to us who are Protestant, "You have gone very well, so far, in your relationship to Christ and in your knowledge of Christ and your knowledge of the cross, but now you need to finish off your Christian experience by the sacramental, or sacramentalism of our church, and thus exhort us to observe the sacraments as observed by the Roman Catholic church.

Essentially, this is the same approach as the Charismatics. They like to come to those who are believers, and they appeal to them with, "You have, so far, gone into the Christian faith quite well. You've made advance, and you are now at the place where, in order to finish off your Christian experience, you need to know what we have experienced and to experience it. And that will make you a full and complete Christian." The same kind of thing in those who come to us with, "You have gone so far in the Christian faith, your knowledge of the person work of Christ is sound, your knowledge of Christian experience to your place and the assurance of your salvation is proper and fine, but what you need now is deeper life teaching."

I was riding in my car just two days ago, and went over in East Dallas, and there was a big sign on Garland Road, "Deeper Life." And an encouragement to come onto the experience of Deeper Life, unfortunately, the light was not too long, I didn't get a chance to read everything that was there, but they have a bookstore, and some meetings, and a hall there for Deeper Life. In other words, "You've gone well, so far, but what you need is something that we can give for you, let us finish it off for you." And then we're all acquainted with what has probably been placarded over the United States almost more than anything else, "The Gospel of Self Esteem." That what we really need, in order to experience Christian life, in its fullness, is the kind of concept of self esteem that will enable us to have a happy and fruitful and prosperous, particularly a prosperous, life. All of these are simply ways in which the Christian faith is supposed to be filled up by the new teaching that we have been missing.

One of the men, that many years ago, I had the privilege of listening to, and whose books I have read through the years, has said, "To piece out the gospel with the rags and tatters of alien cults is not to enrich, but to corrupt it." And that really is what so often happens when people say, "You've gone fine up to this point, but what now you need is this special kind of teaching which turns out to be not a special kind of biblical teaching at all, but something else. So they were offered a fullness, and the Colossians, it's obvious, were not well advanced believing Christians, sound in the word of God and all of its aspects. Obviously, they hadn't been believers all that long. And so, the apostle felt needful to write to them and explain to them that fullness in Christian experience is found in Christ and in Christ alone.

Well there was another approach these people offered. They offered spiritual insight too. They, evidently, had a certain kind of philosophy. We cannot be absolutely sure of this, as I'll try to point out in a moment. But they had a certain kind of philosophy in which they offered individuals further insight into truth, and the apostle seeks to counter that. He says, for example, in chapter 2 in verse 3, concerning the Lord

Jesus Christ, "In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." And it does seem as if he's again countering the idea that the secret to spiritual wisdom and knowledge is found in the special teaching that these false teachers were bringing to the Colossians. And then they offered a kind of spiritual deliverance too. That's evident from the things that are stated in chapter 2, where we read in verse 18, for example, "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind." So there were certain kinds of spiritual deliverance that they offered to individuals, and included in them was a kind of worship of angels. We will talk about the Gnostic Judaism, or something similar to that, that evidently was popular there and which led to that kind of thing.

You know someone has said that heresy is really an acknowledgement of the vitality of the Christian faith. Well I believe that. I think that is true. Heresy is an implicit acknowledgement of the vitality of the Christian faith because what do heretics seek to do? Well they seek to take the truth and modify it. So, it's obvious that the truth has gotten along to that extent. The very fact that they wish to take it and improve it is an evidence of the life of the faith. So when you see people that are heretical concerning the truth, you can say there is still a vitality to the Christian faith. If there was no vitality, there would be no interest in heretically changing the Christian faith.

Now we have a lot of heresy in the 20th century, and we have a lot of heresy in evangelicalism. Unfortunately, it is true. Up to this point, the heresy touches, only indirectly, some of the things that touch the person of Christ, but we have a great deal of false teaching that travels in the circles of evangelicalism, travels around as if it were some kind of new and fresh truth which will give us a deeper experience of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It's very unfortunate. And what is so unfortunate about it too, is the fact that believers who sit in our churches are not really interested in discovering where they may be going wrong.

Well, let's turn the Epistle to the Colossians. And now I'd like to say a few words about the background of this epistle. The more significant features will be given later on as we go through the epistle. But let's, for the beginning, say a word or two about the church and its origin. Colossae, at one time, had been a very significant city. In fact, Herodotus, one of the most famous of the Greek writers, whose histories I read when I was going through college, called Colossae, "A great city of Phrygia." But in Paul's days, it was in decline. But in the city of Colossae, there was, in this Gentile Jewish community, an evangelist to be, who heard Paul in Ephesus. I should mention the fact that there were, in the city of Colossae, a lot of Jewish people who had gathered there, and therefore, the community was really a combination Jewish/Gentile community, the Gentiles, predominate, but a large group of Jewish people. Colossae was about one hundred miles east of the city of Ephesus, one of the most significant of the cities of that particular part of Asia Minor. It was on the Lycus River, a tributary of the Meander, and there with Hierapolis and Laodicea, those three cities a very significant part of that part of Phrygia. Hierapolis was the place where people went as a resort, but Colossae was an important city before the apostle's day.

There was a man there by the name of Epaphras. He is referred to here, in the 4th verse Paul says, "Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and then in the 7th verse we learn how he heard of it, "As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellow servant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit." Now it's possible we should read that, "Who is a faithful minister of Christ for us," as if he were a representative of the Apostle Paul. We know that Paul did not really know the church at Ephesus first hand. He had, so far as we know from this epistle, he had never visited Colossae. Chapter 2 verse 1 seems to say that, "For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh."

So there is no evidence that the apostle had actually been to Colossae. But he had been to Ephesus and he had labored there for three years, and in fact, Luke says, if you remember Acts chapter 19 and verse 10, that when Paul was in Ephesus preaching, preaching everyday in the school of Tyrannus, Luke adds the words, "And all they that were in Asia heard the word." Now, Phrygia and Colossae would have been included in that particular designation of that area as Asia, and so, therefore, it's reasonable to assume that some in Colossae had heard the apostle and had heard him in Ephesus and had gone back to their community. And it seems likely that Epaphras was one of them.

Now in chapter 4 and verse 12 and verse 13, he's mentioned again. We read,

"Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis."

So, Epaphras, then evidently, had wondered over to Ephesus, had heard the apostle preach, and he had gone back to his own land of Colossae, and there he had preached the word to them and had been perhaps the evangelist of the church at Colossae. But now Paul is in Rome in prison, and Epaphras had made his way to Rome, and he has told Paul of the things that have happened in the church, and evidently he was unable to counteract some of the things that are being taught in his area. Paul speaks of this as, "Enticing words," in chapter 2 verse 4. He says, "And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words," or "Beguiling speech," as the Revised Standard Version renders it.

So, the individuals, who had infiltrated the Colossian church, were giving, in the endeavor to push their truth. They were giving forth their truth with enticing words of beguiling speech and the saints were having difficulty with it, and Epaphras, too, was

finding it very difficult to counter it. He had gone to Rome, and there he had made contact with the Apostle Paul, through whose preaching he, himself, may have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. So Colossians, then, was written when Paul was in his Roman imprisonment. We don't know the exact time, the year 60 to 62 AD, sometime in that period of time. Perhaps, in the earlier part, the epistle was written. That's the occasion of the letter, Epaphras' visit to Rome and his contact with the apostle.

Now let me say just a word about the Colossian heresy, and like Peter, I'll try to put it in layman's language. In order to understand Colossians, one needs to understand that the heresy that the apostle was seeking to counteract was an amalgam of ascetic Jewish teaching and Pagan Gnostic practices. So what we have here is something that is not specific, probably a collection of different tatters and pieces of teaching that came from Jewish teaching concerning the Mosaic Law. No doubt, taught in such a way as to be, contrary to the sense of the Old Testament Mosaic Law, but legal things were mixed up with the things of the New Testament teaching and in addition the teaching of the Gnostics.

There have been, not surprisingly I guess for someone who has studied the background of the epistles of the New Testament and the many attempts to explain precisely what Paul may have been seeking to counteract because you must remember that we do not have any book to go along with the New Testament that will tell us exactly the situation which the apostle had to deal with. For example, in the study of the Epistle to the Colossians, forty-four different suggestions, at least, have been made of the kind of teaching that the apostle had to counteract. So obviously, I'm not going to give you the explanation of what Paul was seeking to counteract, at least, "the" in the sense of one that would be accepted by those who study the Epistle to the Colossians.

One of the greatest of the interpreters of Colossians was Bishop Lightfoot, and Bishop Lightfoot called this something like Gnostic Judaism, and what he meant by that, essentially, was that it was a combination of Judaism, a false understanding of it because

of a failure to recognize the age in which the church at Colossae was living, and then that combined with Gnostic teaching. So let me just, kind of very simply, in layman's language, explain what may have been the background of the Gnostic teaching or the Colossians heresy.

The fundamental elements were Jewish. One can see this from chapter 2 verse 16 where the apostle writes, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days," but they were combined with other things, the elements of Gnosticism that were characteristic of that particular time. Gnosticism would be what we would call pagan higher thought, the kind of thing that we might have today under different terminology. It was a philosophy with an intellectually exclusive spirit, and the appeal of Gnosticism was that it claimed to have the answer to the problem to the existence of evil.

Gnostics contended that the world of matter was an evil kingdom antagonistic to God. But God cannot create evil, and so if around us the world of matter is an evil kingdom, it obviously could not have come from the hand of God, for God is a holy God. So the Gnostics surmised that God had limited himself, and that the evil that exists can be traced to divine self limitation. You know you have people today who even say that in Christian things. They will say, "God limits his sovereignty," as if to say, "God will not be God for a bit or for a while."

Well the Gnostics had a similar idea, they suggested God limited himself and out of God came a series of emanations, or eons, something like angelic beings and angelic spirits germinated from God, each being in this series of being for one germinated from God quite holy and so on down the line until finally an eon or an angelic kind of being emanated from a previous being who was touched by evil enough to be the of this world, and so in this way the Gnostics explained the existence of evil in the universe. So creation then was to be traced to one of the angelic beings, and obviously, the next step would be in order for you to understand truly God, you must come to God through

angelic beings. And that's why in chapter 2 and verse 18 we read, "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels," because they suggested that the mediators between man and God were the angelic beings.

Well now if, and we don't say that this is precisely the thought that was taking place in Colossae, but if something like this was there, and we can say surely that something like that was there, and if we regard the world about us as the world of evil and that matter is evil, well that would lead to two practical errors. One practical error would be, if the world around us is evil, what we should do is apply ourselves to asceticism, that is, to have as little contact with evil as possible. And so it's not surprising then, that in Colossians we read in chapter 2 in verse 21 that some of the things that were said in Colossae were,

"Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;" (Paul says,) "after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body: not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh,"

Asceticism, so a kind of legalistic avoidance of contact with evil, that would be one way in which men might respond to the idea that the world about us is an evil world. But the other way is the natural opposite of it. That is if the world about us is evil, then we cannot help but have contact with it, and so, therefore, we should really just follow our own desires and impulses recognizing that the world around us is evil. And so the apostle had to write in his letter, words to counteract license. So those two things were the result of what we would call Gnostic Judaism, on the one hand lie sensuousness, and, on the other hand, asceticism. So that's likely to be the background of the teaching in Colossae, a kind of syncretistic fusion combination of Judaism and these other elements of the Gnosticism of the day.

We have a lot of that kind of thing in Christianity today. We have individuals who like to combine Christian faith with lots of things that are not Christian at all. One of the great proponents of this is Schuller. He's, characteristically, combining Christian terms with, really, a denial of the Christian faith, the Gospel of Self Esteem. You ever heard of that in the Bible? There isn't anything like that in the Bible, the Gospel of Self Esteem. The gospel of success, you think there's anything like that in the Bible? A lot of people buy this, you know. They really think that's great. In fact, it's, I'm sure, true to say that Mr. Schuller has an enormous response in the United States of America and an enormous response among people who would consider themselves to be believing Christians.

But there isn't anything biblical in the gospel of success, or the gospel of self esteem, particularly when it's accompanied by comments like this, "I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christian that has proven more destructive to human personality and hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise and the often crude, uncouth and unchristian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition." Now this is a man who poses as a Christian minister, affirms he believes Christian doctrine, talks about the Gospel of Self Esteem and the Gospel of Success, but attacks making people aware of their lost and sinful condition. What we have in Mr. Schuller's theology is syncretism. He has Christian ideas, or Christian terminology, but they are mixed in with psychological ideas and the result is a gospel that is diluted of its power of salvation. But many people respond to that.

It's not surprising in Paul's day, after having the ministry of Epaphras, one evidently closely associated with Paul; they still went for those things. So we shouldn't be surprised at that. In fact, in Ephesus itself, when the apostle was there, remember you saw some of the evidence of the syncretism of the day in the fact that the seven sons of Sceva, when they heard about Paul coming into town, they were Jewish men. Their father was a high priest. A high priest, in Ephesus, that seems strange, doesn't it? But

anyway, it was there, they were Jewish, and they were exorcists, Luke says. So they, not only were Jewish, but they had combined with their Judaism, exorcism, pagan exorcism, and then when Paul came and was having such success in the preaching of the gospel there, they decided that what they needed was a little bit of Pauline teaching too. And so, the syncretism, or the fusion, of Judaism and Paganism and Christianity resulted in their use of the name Jesus. And you remember they tried to use the name Jesus and one of the demons says, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" and chased them out of the house, and they fled away naked. Well that's a very humorous incident, but it expresses a great deal of truth, and the truth is essentially this, the truth of God is pure truth, and you may expect it to be powerful when it is preached purely.

What is the purpose of Colossians then? Well Paul wanted to counteract the error by pointing to the preeminence and the sufficiency of Jesus Christ. We won't anticipate all of the things that we will be saying, but let me just very briefly hit the high points of it. It's obvious that what Paul states is that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the old creation that is, the physical creation. He states in chapter 1 and verse 16, "For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him."

We do not have angelic mediators or eons who are responsible for the creation. Jesus Christ is the one responsible for the creation. He is the architect and the builder of the universe and the one for whom the creation was created. So he's preeminent in the old creation. He's also preeminent in the new creation because Paul goes on to say, "He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence." The apostle will speak about our Lord's death and his resurrection and his Second Coming and he will point out that when it comes to the church, Jesus Christ is supreme. In fact, when you read the Bible you do not find, in the Bible, any other explanation of our Lord Jesus Christ than that he is a

miraculous figure doing great deeds and making stupendous claims. That is the biblical picture of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And of course, Paul concludes that if he's preeminent in the old creation, having created it, and if he's preeminent in the new creation, having wrought it by virtue of the fact that he's the first born from the dead, he's sufficient for us in all of our needs, and in verse 9 and 10 in chapter 2, he says it plainly, "For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power." So, our Lord is sufficient for us. We do not need a Gospel of Self Esteem. We do not need all the kinds of heretical ideas that are floating around today in evangelicalism because there isn't any solid doctrinal foundation upon which many of us are standing. We need Christ in his person and work, for in him we are filled full. The apostle lays a great deal of stress in this epistle on union with Christ. He doesn't deny the fact of justification but his great emphasis is union with Christ derived from his Damascus road experience when the Lord Jesus said, "Why persecutest thou me?"

John Calvin, in one of his comments concerning union with Christ and the way in which the apostle sets this forth, makes a reference like this, speaking of his flow of thought, Calvin says, "He reminds them that it was in Christ that they had obtained all their blessings, in order that they might the more carefully make it their aim to retain him to the end." And truly, even this one article is, of itself, perfectly sufficient to make us reckon this epistle, short as it is, and incomparable treasure, this one article of the union with Christ joined to him and in possessing him possessed of all of our needs.

Now for just a few moments, I'd like to read the salutation and make a few comments. Adolf Deissmann, speaking about the Epistle to the Colossians, introduces a comment by saying that he had always had a great admiration for Johann Sebastian Bach, but thinking about the rhythms and melodies of the Epistle to the Colossians in the spiritual sense, he says, "When I open the chapel door of the Epistle to the Colossians, it is as if Johann Sebastian himself sat at the organ."

Listen to what Paul has to say, first, a few words about the author, "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." Now Paul's not throwing his weight around, you might think that. He says he's an apostle. But, that is a note of authority, and one must remember that the apostle had never been in Colossae, and so it's proper for him to note the fact that he is an apostle. And I think, he really intends for the Colossians to pay attention to that because he then says, "Timothy our brother." So he makes a distinction between himself and Timothy. He is an apostle. And Timothy is a lovely brother, but he's a brother. Paul would like to establish his credentials for this Christian group, after all not having visited him they, not knowing him personally perhaps, they didn't have the appreciation for the fact that the Lord Jesus had called him in that supernatural way and made him the apostle to the Gentiles.

And further, that apostleship has not been transferred to a papal line of bishops. So my dear Christian friends, if you want to know what Christianity is you don't go to men who write about Christianity, you go to the apostles. The apostles are the representatives of Christianity. The apostolic teaching is true Christianity. If you want to know what Christianity is, immerse yourself in the apostolic teaching. Now the apostles have a great deal to say in their letters, and they also have many clues as to how we are to understand the rest of the Bible for they wrote it, remember, at the end of a long unfolding of the divine revelation, historically. So he's an apostle. He's an apostle of Jesus Christ. We ought to pay attention to him. Therefore, we don't pay attention to orders of servants such as exist in the Roman Catholic church. Three orders of ministry, all of the sacraments, and with a pontifex maximus with a triple tiara, we don't pay attention to that. We go to the apostolic teaching. "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ," if it's found in the apostolic teaching, it's the truth of God.

Now Paul says he was an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. He hadn't aspired to this gift. He's not like a lot of young guys who come to me and say, "I want to be an elder. What can I do to be an elder?" To me that is so foolish, so contrary to the

word of God. Actually if you want to be an elder, function as an elder, and then someone will, ultimately, recognize you as an elder. That's the way to become an elder, function as one. But, of course, in order to function as one, one must have been appointed by the Holy Spirit. That's a sovereign work of God.

So an individual who wants to be an elder, well, he's starting out really the wrong way. God appoints elders, and the evidence of the appointment is in their function. The apostle hadn't aspired to an apostle, or apostleship, and he was not rashly discharging an embassy that had been trusted to him. He regards himself as an apostle, but by the will of God. Now that means, not by the will of man, by the will of God. In other words, the ultimate decision is the decision of God. That is so true. A. T. Robertson, the great Southern Baptist New Testament scholar said, "Paul laid no claims to ecclesiastical authority, the only authority he laid claim to was the authority that was given to him personally by the Lord Jesus Christ, an apostle of the Gentiles, by the will of God." That's fundamental to all of Paul's teaching. It was not by the will of man. It was by the will of God.

Now he says, "To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ," in the feted atmosphere of the pagan city of Colossae, there were saints, and they were in Christ, like the little water beetle which has the power of gathering air around itself and then to sink down into water and live in the mud at the bottom of a stream, so the Christians in Colossae were in Christ, but also in Colossae. Paul calls them, "Faithful brethren in Christ." They were in Colossae, but not in Colossae only. If they had been in Colossae only, we would have utter secularism. Or if it were possible for an individual to be only in Christ, some try to be that way, what you would have would be monasticism. But, those are not the alternatives; one may be in Colossae and in Christ. And Paul says, "Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father." I like the way that the epistle ends because grace is a Gentile greeting and peace is a Jewish greeting, and it's very fitting in a syncretistic city where Christians were to address them in this way, for what is the church

of Jesus Christ but a body called the people of God who are composed of both Gentiles and Jews, but all related to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, if you're here this morning and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, you're not in the church, you're not in Christ, but you may be in Christ through faith in him who offered the atoning sacrifice. Our invitation to you is to entrust yourself to him who offered that sacrifice, and entrust yourself to the teaching of the apostles as recorded in the New Testament itself. Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father, we give Thee thanks for Thy word. We thank Thee for this marvelous little letter the apostle wrote to the church at Colossae. We thank Thee for the way in which it unfolds the sufficiency of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and we pray that we may be delivered from alien teaching, the rags and tatters of things that are really not true to the fundamental spirit of the New Testament and Old Testament revelation. Lord, if there are some here who do not know Christ, we pray that, through the word of God and through the knowledge that Christ has died for sinners, they may come to know him and to know his life eternal. For Jesus' sake. Amen.