

Growing Up: Introduction

Goldstone Church – 10-Jan-16 10:30am

Colossians 1:1-2

Introduction

We're starting a series looking at the book of Colossians.

The book of Colossians is one of the most profound letters that Apostle Paul ever wrote; you wonder how the Apostle Paul managed to cram in so much teaching and truth into only a few chapters. I believe that the message that we find in Colossians is greatly needed today; *everyone* needs to hear and take-in the message of Colossians.

We're going to start by placing this letter in some sort of context. This is the Apostle Paul's *letter* to the church in Colossae, so there must have been a reason why it was written. Understanding the context will, I hope, help us to discover extra layers of the truths being taught.

1. THE CITY

Colossae was one of 3 cities not far from Ephesus in Asia Minor, in modern-day Turkey. The 3 cities of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis were located at a crossroads; the intersection of important trade routes.

History tells us that, initially, all 3 cities grew and were prosperous, but gradually, Colossae slipped behind and became a small town.

Because Colossae was on this important trade route, different people regularly passed through it, with all kinds of philosophies and religious teachings thrown together. Colossae had a large Jewish colony, but this was influenced by new ideas and religious doctrines, especially those that came from the East.

Colossae was a place where you could find just about every religious expression.

According to the '2011 UK Census': 59% said they were Christian, 25% said "no religion", 7% gave no answer, 5% said Muslim, 1% said Hindu, and 3% "Other Religions". (The percentage figures in Brighton & Hove were about the same as these national figures).

After comparing the 2011 Census with previous data, statisticians describe the UK as "the fastest secularising nation in history".

You can now find just about every religious expression in UK.

It seems that the city of Colossae in the New Testament has remarkable similarities to present day Hove. Which makes the Apostle Paul's letter very relevant to us today.

2. THE CHURCH

The city of Colossae might not have been mentioned in the New Testament, if it wasn't for the Colossian church. As far as we know, Apostle Paul never visited Colossae, and he didn't start the church. So, how did the Colossian church begin?

The answer is in Acts (chapter 19 & 20), when Apostle Paul visited Ephesus, and then stayed there for 3 years. Acts 19:10 says that "*all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.*" This would have included people from Colossae and the surrounding cities.

During this time in Ephesus, at least 2 men from Colossae became Christians: Epaphras and Philemon. Epaphras is mentioned in Colossians, and is one of the key founders of the church in Colossae. Philemon (who Paul wrote to and has his own book) held church meetings in his home.

We have further similarities with present day Hove:

The church in Colossae did not have their own church building –like Goldstone church.

The Colossians were predominantly Gentiles –like Goldstone church.

The Colossians were located in a small town –like Goldstone church.

The Colossians met in homes –like we do here at Goldstone church.

The Apostle Paul's letter suddenly becomes even more relevant to us today.

3. THE CRISIS

Paul wrote this letter to the Colossian church because a crisis had occurred that was about to destroy the church. False teaching had been introduced into the Colossian church - a heresy that could threaten the peace and purity of the Colossian church.

At the risk of over simplifying the situation, the heresy was cocktail of 3 elements, a combination of:

- Gnosticism,
- Eastern philosophy
- Jewish legalism

Gnosticism is a term that comes from the Greek word, GNOSIS, and means “to know”. The Gnostics were people who thought they were “in the know” when it came to deep things about God. And being “in the know”, they considered themselves as being the “spiritual elite” in the church.

This heresy promised people such a close union with God, that they would achieve “spiritual perfection”; a “super wisdom” that would release them from earthly things and put them in touch with heavenly things.

Gnosticism was popular with the Greeks in the West, but actually has its roots in **Eastern philosophy**. This philosophy promotes that God is holy and Matter (earthly stuff) is evil. They believed that a holy God cannot come into contact with evil matter; so there is some form of heavenly intermediaries that influence affairs on earth. (Weird!)

Added to this, was a form of **Jewish legalism**. These people believed that the rite of circumcision, and the Old Testament laws about what to eat, were ‘pathways’ for achieving spiritual perfection. They believed that Matter was evil, so they had to control their own human natures to reach perfection. Strict discipline – that was the key.

Put these 3 elements together, and we see how these false teachings undermined the very foundation of Christianity. The person and the work of Jesus Christ is completely sidestepped. Instead of Emmanuel, God with us, they claimed God was keeping His distance from us. When we trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, there is no need for intermediary-beings between us and heaven! On the cross at Calvary, Jesus settled the sin question once-and-for-all, and gives us eternal life. Rituals and laws are not needed. What we need is Jesus – God with us.

Sadly, these false teachings and heresies are still with us today. Whenever anyone makes Jesus only a part of being a Christian, they are on dangerous ground. Christians who mix their Christian faith with other beliefs are downgrading the greatness of Jesus Christ.

Yes, this letter is relevant to us today.

4. THE CALL

The first 2 verses of this letter could be considered as just an Introduction.

v.1 is in the familiar format that Apostle Paul uses for his letters.

Similarly, v.2 uses Paul's template for identifying who he is writing to.

But notice the **3** key phrases that Paul uses to describe the Colossian Christians:

a) **Holy People.** "*To God's holy people...*".

In the original Greek, the Apostle Paul uses a word that means "most holy", as in a saint. But it's not a cold title; there is a warmth to the phrase. Paul is referring to them as a cherished and loved, holy and sacred people.

Although there is strong and direct teaching to follow in this letter, as God's people, you are cherished and loved and valued.

If you are reading this letter, then you are people that God loves and cherishes.

This still applies today.

b) **Faithful People.** "... [to] *the faithful brothers and sisters...*".

In the original Greek, the word means "trusted, and relied upon". Even though Paul hasn't met the people in the Colossian church, he has heard that they are people who can be trusted.

In other words, if you are reading this letter, then you are people who can be relied upon to continue on as disciples for Jesus Christ.

This still applies today.

c) **Peaceful People.** "*Grace and peace to you from God...*".

Actually a double phrase: Grace and Peace.

The word "grace" is both a formal greeting, e.g. 'Dear So & So', but it also has a friendly element; it is full of joy and kindness.

This is linked with "peace", a word that focuses on the peaceful relationship between *individuals*. Paul is affirming that, as God's people, there is a personal relationship with God that is full of joy and peace.

In other words, if you are reading this letter, then you are people who are in a personal, joyful and peaceful relationship with Jesus Christ.

This still applies to us today.

There is an invitation to us from the book of Colossians. In Colossians 4:16, the Apostle Paul instructs that this letter is to be read at another church in Laodicea. Paul wants the teaching in this letter to be shared - shared to all those for whom it is relevant.

As God's "Holy People" here at Goldstone church, God loves us and cherishes us, and wants to speak to us through this letter.

As God's "Faithful People" here at Goldstone church, God sees us as his eager disciples, and wants to speak to us through this letter.

As God's "Peaceful People" here at Goldstone church, God wants to speak to us personally and intimately through this letter.

CONCLUSION

There is so much about the people and church in Colossae that is relevant to us today. We need the message from the book of Colossians; we need it individually, we need it as a church, and we need this as a community.

We live in a culture where many people believe that one religion is just as good as any other. For many, "religious tolerance" is when you take the 'best bits' from various religious systems, and manufacture your own 'private religion'. Jesus Christ is just one of several options. Jesus may be prominent, but He is not the only choice – He is not the only way.

Our society is not denying Christ; sadly, they are just dethroning Him to an "also-ran".

Our vision statement at Goldstone church is:

"We seek to become a loving, caring fellowship of believers fulfilling the mandate to love God, to love one another and to love the wider community."

This vision statement has appeared on every weekly notice sheet for the last 4 months because we need to know why we are here and where we are going.

To help us remember this vision, we're going to condense this down to 6 words:

"Growing Up, Growing Out, Growing Together"

(Note: the vision is unchanged, just the words)

God is calling us to keep on "Growing Up" in our Christian faith.

To grow and deepen our relationship with God. To celebrate afresh the greatness and pre-eminence of Jesus Christ. To be sure and to know what we believe, and to live out that knowledge through our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. To be filled to *overflowing* with the power of the Holy Spirit, and to be worthy ambassadors for Jesus Christ.

As God's Holy People, as God's Faithful People, and as God's Peaceful People, let us live out the fullness of life that He has given to each one of us through Jesus Christ.

AMEN