

# 11. *Seek what is above ...* (Colossians 3: 1 - 17)

4<sup>th</sup> July 2010

More or Less Christian?

Deceitful philosophies... it's not enough!

Do more, Experience more, Know more...

Your identity in Christ – the heart of the answer

Know who you are

Dead and alive

Really?

More now and more not yet...

Paul the Gnostic?

Remember who you are

A lifestyle of setting our hearts on Christ

Adoption

Helping each other remember

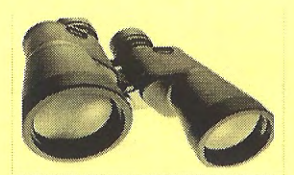
A Community of Radical Holiness and Love

A big NO to Silas and Frank

The privilege and duty of our new identity

Can't be bothered?

The flesh and bones of holy love...





## Background and Introduction to Colossians.

(P.T. O'Brian, from the IVP 'Dictionary of Paul and his letters'.)

### 2. The Church at Colossae.

The believers at Colossae, who are addressed as faithful brothers and sisters in Christ (Col 1:2), were not converted through the ministry of Paul himself. This Christian community had come into existence during a period of vigorous missionary and evangelistic activity associated with Paul's Ephesian ministry (c. a.d. 52-55) recorded in Acts 19. But the apostle himself during his missionary work in Asia Minor had not reached Colossae in the upper valley of the Lycus (cf. Col 2:1). His daily evangelistic "dialogues" held in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus were so effective that Luke can claim "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). While the work was directed by Paul, he was assisted by several coworkers through whom a number of churches were planted in the province of Asia. Among these were the congregations of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, which, we infer, were the fruit of Epaphras's evangelistic efforts (Col 1:7; 4:12, 13). Epaphras, a native of Colossae (Col 4:12), who may have become a Christian during a visit to Ephesus, was "a faithful minister of Christ" and as Paul's representative (Col 1:7) he had taught the Colossians the truth of the gospel.

The many allusions to the non-Christian past of the readers suggest that most of them were Gentile converts. They had once been utterly out of harmony with God, enmeshed in idolatry and slavery to sin, being hostile to God in mind and godless in their actions (Col 1:21; cf 1:12, 27). They had been spiritually dead because of their sins and "the uncircumcision of ... [their] flesh"—a statement which indicates they were both heathen and godless (Col 2:13).

### 3. The Occasion of the Letter.

Epaphras had paid Paul a visit in Rome (see 6.2 below) and informed him of the progress of the gospel in the Lycus valley. While much of the report was encouraging (cf. Col 1:8; 2:5), one disquieting feature was the attractive, but false, teaching that had recently been introduced into the congregation and which, if it went unchecked, would subvert the gospel and bring the Colossians into spiritual bondage. Paul's letter then is written as a response to this urgent need. Perhaps Epaphras found it difficult to cope with the specious arguments and the feigned humility of those spreading this teaching, and so needed the greater wisdom of the apostle.

## 4. The Threat to Faith and the "Colossian Heresy."

**4.1. Was There a "Colossian Heresy"?** Nowhere in the letter does the apostle give a formal exposition of the "heresy"; its chief features can be detected only by piecing together and interpreting his positive counterarguments. Several recent scholars have questioned whether these counterarguments point to the existence of a "Colossian heresy" at all. They prefer to speak in terms of tendencies rather than a clear-cut system with definite points and suggest that the young converts were under external pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their Jewish and pagan neighbours (Hooker). This view rightly stresses Paul's positive statements about the life and stability of the congregation (Col 1:3-8; 2:5) and warns against the danger of arguing in a circle when reconstructing the situation behind Paul's writings. However, in the light of Colossians 2:8-23 with its references to "fullness," specific ascetic injunctions (Col 2:21), regulations about food and holy days, unusual phrases which seem to be catchwords of Paul's opponents and the strong emphasis on what Christ has already achieved by his death and resurrection, it seems appropriate to speak of a "heresy" which had just begun to make some inroads into the congregation.

**4.3. Interpreting These Distinguishing Marks (of the "Heresy").** No complete agreement has been achieved among scholars as to the nature of the teaching. Basically the heresy seems to have been Jewish, because of the references to food regulations, the Sabbath and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar. Circumcision is mentioned (Col 2:11) but did not appear as one of the legal requirements. (Wright argues for an exclusively Jewish background to the heresy.) But what kind of Judaism? [...]

Many recent scholars [...] consider that the false teaching, which advanced beyond Epaphras' elementary gospel, is to be read against the background of ascetic and mystical forms of Jewish piety (as evidenced, for example, at Qumran). It was for a spiritual elite who were being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge so as to attain true "fullness." "Self-abasement" (Col 2:18, 23) was a term used by opponents to denote ascetic practices that were effective for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries and participating in mystical experiences. The "mature" were thus able to gain entrance into heaven and join in the "angelic worship of God" as part of their present experience (Col 2:18).