

TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARIES

TNTC

COLOSSIANS
AND PHILEMON



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COMMENTARY

1. OPENING GREETING (1:1–2)

Context

In keeping with his usual letter openings, Paul identifies himself as an apostle, says who is with him as he writes and who he is writing to, and he greets the recipients of the letter. Although these letter openings contain common elements, they still need to be understood in the particular context in which they are found. In this particular letter Paul will highlight the supremacy and sufficiency of the Lord Jesus and so even these common elements of this letter opening are enriched in light of what follows. Thus Paul describes everyone in these opening greetings in light of the difference the Lord Jesus has made. This is of course unsurprising in the light of Pauline theology that centres on Jesus. Still, in this context these descriptions should be read in the context of what Paul will go on to say to the Colossians.

Comment

1. Paul begins this letter by identifying himself as *an apostle of Christ Jesus*. In other contexts this term ‘apostle’ can simply refer to

a messenger (cf. e.g. 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25) or to those ‘commissioned’ (cf. e.g. Barnabas, Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Cor. 9:6) without any reference to this unique authority that the apostles chosen by Jesus had.¹ In this context, however, the designation *apostle* means that Paul is an authorized and personally chosen representative of the promised Messiah, the risen Jesus, to proclaim the good news, along with the twelve (Acts 1:21–22; 1 Cor. 9:1–2; 15:5, 7, 9), and whose foundational role in the new covenant people of God enables him to speak with the authority of Christ (1 Cor. 14:37; Eph. 2:20). The Greek word, *Christos*, translates the Hebrew word *mashiach*, which in this context identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Paul’s primary task is to make Christ known, with the authority of Christ, as Christ himself had commanded him (cf. Acts 26:15–23). Thus Paul did not see himself as operating independently of Christ or setting himself up as a founder of something other than what Christ came to earth to do (cf. Gal. 1:10). Although Paul usually opens his letters with reference to his apostleship (see comments on Philemon 1), this laser focus on Christ is especially prominent in this letter as Paul will unpack with great detail the significance of the supremacy of Christ for the world in general, and for the Colossians in particular. When he adds that this apostleship is *by the will of God*, Paul recognizes, as he often does, God’s sovereign purposes (Rom. 1:10; 15:32; 1 Cor. 4:19; 2 Cor. 2:14), particularly in his own conversion by Christ and commission to proclaim Christ (Acts 22:14; Gal. 1:15–16).

Timothy is mentioned in the opening greetings of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians, Philippians and Philemon. Timothy was also with Paul and sent greetings when Paul wrote to the Romans (16:21); he was sent by Paul to the believers in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2), Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10) and Philippi (Phil. 2:19), and he was known to the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 13:23). Paul variously calls Timothy his ‘co-worker’ (Rom. 16:21; 1 Thess. 3:2; cf. 1 Cor. 16:10), a ‘servant of Christ’ along with Paul (Phil. 1:1), Paul’s ‘son’ (1 Tim. 1:18), ‘dear son’ (2 Tim. 1:2), ‘true son in the faith’ (1 Tim. 1:2) and his ‘son’ whom he loves and who is ‘faithful

1. Cf. Harris, p. 7.

in the Lord' (1 Cor. 4:17). The 'son' language implies that Timothy came to faith through Paul (see on Philemon 10) and the 'co-worker/servant' language points to a long and precious partnership in gospel ministry.² Paul calls Timothy *our brother* here, in Philemon 1 and in 1 Thessalonians 3:2 (cf. Heb. 13:23).³ Timothy was a close labourer in gospel ministry who reflected Paul's passion for Christlike sacrificial service. His inclusion here may indicate that he helped Paul as a scribe or amanuensis and since he was with Paul during his two to three years of ministry in nearby Ephesus (Acts 19:10, 22; see below on 1:7) it is likely that Timothy met some people from Colossae during that time. Since Timothy's name does not reappear in the letter, and since Paul's name reoccurs without further reference to Timothy in Colossians 1:23 and again in the final greeting in 4:18, the first person singular pronouns and verbs in crucial texts such as 1:24, 2:4, 4:4 and 4:7–15 all point to Paul as the ultimate author of the letter.⁴ The simple designation of Timothy as *our brother* focuses on Timothy's spiritual family identity as a member of the family of God, and the equal status that he and all believers have because Christ has brought them together and they now know God as their Father (cf. 1:2). In the following verse all the believers at Colossae are called *brothers and sisters in Christ* (1:2). Later, Tychicus is called a *dear brother* (4:7), as is Onesimus (4:9) and all the believers across the valley at Laodicea (4:15). The significance of what it means to be a 'brother' in the family of God is especially significant in Philemon (see comments on Philemon 7, 16, 20).

2. Having described himself and Timothy in light of the impact of Christ in their lives, Paul proceeds to describe the believers at Colossae in a similar way. They are *God's holy people and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ*. The designation *God's holy people* ('saints', e.g. ESV, NRSV) is a description of the status that all believers have

2. See Acts 16:1 (and Paul's work in Lystra in 14:6–18, 21).

3. The article functions as a pronoun here and in Philemon, whereas the pronoun 'our' is used in 1 Thess. 3:2 and Heb. 13:23.

4. Beale, pp. 24–25. For an emphasis on co-authorship see McKnight, p. 81.

before God as people who belong to God rather than a description of their performance or level of holy living (i.e. the word ‘saints’ and the expression ‘holy people’ should not be misunderstood to refer to a special level of Christian who is above all others). Position in Christ and subsequent conformity to Christ are of course inseparable. Yet this description of believers as holy, occurring another four times in this letter (cf. 1:4, 12, 26; 3:12), refers to who believers are because of Christ. As Paul will state later in this letter, Christ died on the cross in order to present us ‘holy . . . without blemish and free from accusation’ (1:22). Paul’s use of the word ‘holy’ draws on the use of the word in the Old Testament to refer to that which is set apart to be dedicated to or to belong to God. The word was used at times to describe the people of God in the Old Testament (e.g. Pss 16:3; 34:9; Dan. 7:18, 22, 27), and is often used by Paul for God’s new covenant people (e.g. outside his opening greetings, Rom. 15:25; 1 Cor. 6:2; 16:15; 2 Cor. 13:12; Eph. 3:18; Phil. 4:22).

The description of the Colossians as *faithful* is also a description of who they are as believers in Christ rather than a reference to their level of faithfulness. Although faithfulness is expected for believers and can be a description of some (cf. 1:7; 4:7, 9), since in this context this term refers to all of those who are holy rather than a select number of them, it is more likely that this description also refers to who they are.⁵ Because they have trusted in Christ (see the ref. to ‘faith’ in 1:4), they are ‘believers’, the *faithful* ones, they belong to God by faith.⁶ Like *our brother* Timothy (1:1), because of the Lord Jesus, they enjoy the family identity and equal status that all believers, not just a select few, have as brothers and sisters because of Christ. In applying the terms ‘holy’, ‘believers/faithful’ and ‘brothers and sisters’ to all of the people of God in Colossae, Paul draws attention to the unity of the one people of God. It is not

5. Taking the word ‘and’ between ‘saints’ and ‘faithful’ as epexegetical (and taking the word ‘holy ones’ as a noun); cf. Harris, p. 9; Pao, p. 48; Beale, p. 28. For ‘holy’ as an adjective see Campbell, p. 2 (the explanation above is not affected by this).

6. Cf. the use of *pistos* (believing) in 1 Tim. 4:3.

some who are holy, some who believe, some who have more privileged access, because they follow extra special rules or practices. Rather, this is true for all of them because they are *in Christ*. This phrase is significant for understanding Paul's theology in general as well as the emphases of this letter. It is such a common phrase, along with variations such as 'in him', 'in the Lord', that it is impossible to boil it down to just one definition that covers all uses. In this context the phrase 'in Christ' means that all this is true of the people of God because they belong to Christ. What is true of him is true of them and of all who trust in Christ. In the broader salvation-historical framework of Paul's gospel all humanity can be broadly defined by who they belong to – Adam or Christ (Rom. 5:12–21). The actions of each one affects all who belong to them. Those who belong to Christ by grace through faith are essentially transferred from the realm in which Adam's sinful trespass holds sway (sin, death, condemnation) to the realm in which Christ's obedience holds sway (righteousness, life, justification). Thus there is often a 'new realm' in view when this phrase is used (cf. Col. 1:13).

At the same time that they are spiritually *in Christ* they are also geographically *in Colossae*. The former has eternal significance regardless of the earthly significance of the latter. Colossae was not as large as other destinations of Paul's letters such as Rome, Corinth and nearby Ephesus, and it was becoming overshadowed by its near neighbour Laodicea (cf. Col. 2:1; 4:13, 15, 16; see the Introduction above for more on Colossae). Still, regardless of the geographical location of believers, Christ is sufficient for them. What matters is that they are 'in Christ', the Creator and Sustainer of all creation, the Saviour of all who trust in him and the hope of glory (1:16–17, 22–23, 27; 3:4).

Paul concludes his letter opening with his greeting to the believers in which he, as usual, transforms a standard letter opening in light of Christ. Rather than open with the standard word 'greetings' (*chairein*, cf. Acts 15:23), Paul wishes the believers *grace* (*charis*). In Colossians, 'God's grace' is something one only comes to know through the gospel (1:6). In this context, Paul wants the Colossians to know by experience that their continuing Christian life is also only lived out by God's undeserved favour. Since he begins and ends the letter with 'grace' (4:18), it is the gospel of grace

that frames the letter and drives Paul's hopes for the Colossians that they will live by this in contrast to the demands of the false teachers. Similarly, Paul's wish for the believers to know *peace* arises out of the framework expressed elsewhere in Colossians that believers have been reconciled to God through Christ (1:20–22). It is because of Christ's death that believers are no longer at enmity with God and thus live out their lives now in harmony with God.

This *grace and peace* comes to the believers from God *our Father*. Unlike his other opening greetings, Paul does not add something like 'and our Lord Jesus Christ'.⁷ The focus, therefore, in this greeting is on the reality that since all believers know God as their grace-and-peace-giving *Father* they are now *brothers and sisters*.⁸ The privilege of knowing that the Creator of the universe is our Father, and that as believers we are his children living under his grace and peace, is something that Paul returns to throughout this letter, particularly as he expresses thanksgiving in the following verses (1:3, 12; 3:17).

Theology

These opening verses are filled with references to God's gracious purposes in the lives of his people. Paul is an apostle 'by the will of God', believers are the recipients of grace and peace 'from God', and this God is 'our Father'. It follows then that God's people are understood in relation to him. God's people are a family – Timothy is 'our brother' – and all believers are 'brothers and sisters'. The defining characteristics of believers are in relation to God: they belong to him ('holy') and they are his by believing in him ('faithful/believers'). All of this is possible through Jesus who is the Messiah. Thus by God's will Paul is an authorized representative of, and missionary for, Jesus the Messiah, and God's people are those who belong to Christ ('in Christ'). The reference to Jesus

7. Although there is good external manuscript support for the inclusion of this phrase (cf. \aleph^{25}), there is also good manuscript support for its omission. Conformity to the standard Pauline greeting explains the scribal addition rather than accidental omission here.

8. Beale, p. 29.

as the Messiah also alludes to the continuity and discontinuity of the Testaments. On the one hand, reference to one God and the description of his people as holy uses standard Old Testament language. Yet a development has taken place. The promised Messiah has come and he is Jesus. God's people are those who have faith and submit to teaching from him and about him from his authorized representatives, the apostles.

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