



Introduction to Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon

Behind the letters of Paul to the Christian believers in Colossae and to one of their number by the name of Philemon is a wonderful story of evangelism, church planting and Christian growth. Some of the details of the story are a little unclear, and there are some gaps in the evidence, but the main lines are vivid enough. I will take the liberty of filling in some of the gaps in the following reconstruction of what took place.

The story begins with a rather well-to-do businessman who lived in the town of Colossae. His name was Philemon. It may have been his business that brought him one day in about the year A.D. 53 down to the coastal town of Ephesus, not far from Colossae. No doubt he had visited Ephesus many times, but on this occasion there was quite a stir – because a Jewish man, by the name of Paul, was gathering crowds in a hall in the town and arguing about one he called Jesus, who (he claimed) was not only the Messiah of Israel, but also the Lord and judge of all people everywhere (see Acts 19:8-10). Other astonishing things were happening around this man Paul: diseases were remarkably healed, evil spirits left people (Acts 19:11, 12). Like many others in Ephesus at the time, Philemon (though not Jewish himself) came to hear Paul. To his own surprise he was persuaded by this extraordinary message and came to faith in Messiah Jesus, the Lord. Philemon actually became involved in some way with Paul in his work. It is likely that he subsequently returned to Ephesus on a number of occasions over the next year or two, and supported and helped Paul in his missionary labours there.



At about the same time, another citizen of Colossae had much the same experience as Philemon. His name was Epaphras. (Epaphras, like Philemon, was not Jewish.) Unfortunately the details are vague, but both of these men returned home to Colossae, now believers in Jesus, the Christ and the Lord. We know that Epaphras told 'the word of truth' to many of his fellow citizens of Colossae, the gospel that he had learned from Paul. A number of them understood the truth of the grace of God and also came to faith in Messiah Jesus (see Col. 1:3-8). Epaphras went on with the same news to the nearby towns of Hierapolis and Laodicea, with similar results. In Colossae the new believers in Christ Jesus began meeting together in Philemon's house. No doubt Philemon, from his time with Paul, was able to provide some kind of leadership and encouragement to the growing gathering of new believers meeting under his roof.

Our attention must now turn to one member of Philemon's household, a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus, whose name meant 'useful', did not live up to his name. He was not the best of slaves, and does not appear to have got on well with his master. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Onesimus was not caught up in the strange ideas his master had brought back from his recent trip to Ephesus. The odd gatherings of people from different backgrounds that had started to take place in the house must have been perplexing to him.

Again we wish we had more details, but we don't. For some reason Onesimus chose to run away from his master and, in the process, may have robbed him. For slaves to run away like this was not unusual, but it was dangerous. It seems that Onesimus fled far from Colossae (for understandable reasons) and found his way eventually to far-off Rome.

Some years had passed since Paul had been preaching about Christ Jesus in Ephesus. It was now about A.D. 60 or 61. Much had happened to Paul through these years, but by the time Onesimus came to Rome, by a remarkable providence, Paul, too, was in Rome. He was there, however, as a prisoner. He lived in his own rented quarters, with a Roman soldier guarding him (Acts 28:16). The book of Acts tells us that he 'lived there two whole years at his own

expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance' (Acts 28:30, 31). Once again we are tantalized with a lack of answers to many questions, but among 'all who came to him' was apparently Onesimus. What drew Onesimus to the friend of his former master, we can only guess. The fact is that Paul led Onesimus to Jesus. Onesimus became a believer! Furthermore, a deep affection grew between Paul and Onesimus, and he assisted Paul in various ways.

Some time passed. Then one day, there was another surprise for Paul. A familiar face from those years in Ephesus appeared among his visitors. It was Epaphras. Here the lack of detail is very frustrating. The circumstances of Epaphras' coming to Rome are unknown to us, as is the way in which he came into contact with Paul. However, it seems that he, like Paul, was (or became) a prisoner of the authorities, somehow in connection with his faith in Christ. What we know is that Epaphras shared with Paul news of the believers back in Colossae, and also in Hierapolis and Laodicea – news of their solid faith, their extravagant love, their confident hope, and their orderly lives (see Col. 1:7b, 8; 2:5).

Paul was, of course, overjoyed and full of thankfulness to God. Yet two things now needed to be done. First, he needed to make contact with this group of believers meeting in his old friend Philemon's house. He needed to ensure that they were firmly established in the faith, that they continued to walk in Christ Jesus the Lord. So he wrote a letter to confirm and strengthen and stabilize the faith of the Colossian believers. This letter has found its place in the New Testament, and is the concern of the first part of this commentary.

Second, what was to be done about Onesimus, the slave who had now come to faith in Christ Jesus, but who had run away from Paul's dear friend and brother in Christ, Philemon, in whose house the Colossian believers now met?

Paul carefully wrote another letter (the focus of the second part of this commentary). He sent the two letters off to Colossae by the hand of a long-time, trusted colleague,

Tychicus. With Tychicus he also sent (no doubt to everyone's surprise) Onesimus!

When Tychicus and Onesimus reached Colossae, word soon spread among the believers that a letter had arrived from Paul, the man who had taught Epaphras and Philemon the news about the Lord Jesus that they had all come to believe. They gathered (as I imagine the scene) in Philemon's house to hear the letter read, and Tychicus read the longer of the two letters he had carried from Rome.

I have tried to imagine what was happening with Onesimus. Did he join the gathering? Or was he kept out of sight for a while? We do not know. But when Tychicus finished reading the longer letter, I picture him saying, 'Brothers, I do have another letter from Paul that he wants you all to hear. It is brief, but important.' Tychicus then read the letter we know as 'Philemon'.

The account I have given includes a number of assumptions and other understandings that are not beyond doubt. Here I will briefly comment on the most important of these, but refer the reader to the more substantial commentaries for detailed discussions of the evidence.

1. The authorship of the letters

Since the rise of critical biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century questions have been raised about whether Paul really wrote Colossians. Arguments have been made about differences between the style, vocabulary and theology of this letter, when compared to other letters more certainly by Paul. These arguments are all indecisive, depending on substantial assumptions (based on a very small corpus of writings agreed to be by Paul) about what he could and could not have written.

Against these arguments stands the clear claim of the letter, not only in its opening words, but in many personal references to Paul and his circumstances through the document. Any suggestion that this evidence is not to be taken at face value calls for far more significant proofs than have been advanced.

The situation with Philemon is rather different. Few scholarly challenges have been mounted against the plain claim of that letter to have been authored by the apostle Paul.

In each case it is possible that the actual physical writing may have been done by another hand, under Paul's direction or dictation. This may be suggested by the way in which he draws attention to the points at which the words have in fact been written 'with my own hand' (Col. 4:18; cf. Philem. 19, but see our comments later on this verse). This, however, does not alter the fact that the 'I' of these letters is clearly presented as Paul himself.

2. The date and place from which they were written

These matters are related and the subject of considerable scholarly discussion. When he wrote both letters, he was imprisoned (Col. 4:10, 18; Philem. 1, 23). The letters, however, nowhere directly say where this was. There are two main possibilities. Paul may have been imprisoned during his three years in Ephesus, in about A.D. 52-55. The account of Paul's time in that city in the book of Acts does not mention a period of imprisonment, but it is possible. The book of Acts does, however, record Paul's two years of house arrest in Rome in about A.D. 60-62. Arguments in favour of the letters having been written during an imprisonment in Ephesus include the closer proximity of that city to Colossae, and the numerous movements of people indicated in the letters between where Paul was and Colossae. However (while certainty is not possible) I have assumed that the imprisonment from which these letters were written was the one described at the end of the book of Acts. This fits with all of the data that we have, and it is hardly ruled out by the difficulty of several trips by various persons between Rome and Colossae. Indeed the later date of the Roman imprisonment (compared to a hypothetical Ephesian incarceration) may better allow for the various things that appear to have happened between Paul's evangelistic work in Ephesus and the writing of these letters (see the reconstruction above).

3. Why was the longer letter to Colossae written?

The motivation for Paul writing his longer letter to the believers in Colossae has been the subject of a great deal of discussion and debate. Much of this has focused on attempts to discern a 'false teaching' present at Colossae and which Paul had presumably heard about from Epaphras. On this view, the letter was written 'to provide the resources that the Colossian Christians need to fend off some kind of false teaching to which they are exposed'.¹ The commentaries generally accept that there was such a teaching present in Colossae, and that Paul's letter was intended to address this problem.

The existence of what we may generally call 'false teaching' in many early Christian communities is beyond doubt. A number of Paul's letters have explicit references, not only to such teachings, but also to the false teachers themselves. One striking feature of the letter to the Colossians is that there is no direct reference to either false teachers or particular false teaching. This has led to a wide range of proposals concerning the kind of teaching that Paul may have been 'correcting' or at least responding to in this letter. The range of views is wide because there is such a lack of evidence to control speculations.

Another possibility is attractive. Perhaps Paul makes no direct and explicit reference to false teachers and false teaching simply because there was no such specific threat in Colossae, or at least none of which he had particular knowledge. If this were the case, Paul's letter would have the purpose summed up in the following words: 'Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving' (Col. 2:6, 7).

In other words, Paul wrote to the believers of whom he had heard such a marvellous report from Epaphras, not because they were in some *particular* danger, but to confirm them in their 'good order and the firmness of [their] faith

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), p. 47.

in Christ' (Col. 2:5b). Certainly Paul was aware of the many challenges to this faith in the world of his day (as in ours!). Therefore he warns them of dangers. However, these are not to be interpreted as clues about a specific 'false teaching' in Colossae, but to be understood as indications of the *kind* of threat that believers could be expected to face.² This view has been adopted in the exposition that follows, and will be explained more fully at various points.

In this commentary I have tried to imagine us joining the believers gathered in Philemon's house to hear Tychicus read these two remarkable letters. I invite readers to join me in this imaginative and highly instructive exercise.

Study Questions

1. Read the account of Paul's time in Ephesus in Acts 19 (where, we understand, Philemon and Epaphras were among those who became believers in Christ Jesus the Lord).
 - a. Note the indications of the effectiveness of Paul's ministry among non-Jewish hearers. How was it, do you think, that such people came to believe in the Messiah of Israel?
 - b. What was it about Paul's message that aroused opposition?
2. Read about Paul's time in Rome in Acts 28:11-31 (where the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon were probably written).
 - a. What happened in Rome that emphasized, for Paul, the importance of the gospel going to the nations?
 - b. How does Luke summarize Paul's teaching to those who came to him during his two years in Rome (including, we understand, Onesimus).

² A view along these lines is argued persuasively by Morna D. Hooker, 'Were There False Teachers in Colossae?' in Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley, eds, *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: Studies in Honour of Francis Digby Moule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 315-31.



3. Read through the letters Paul wrote from Rome to the believers in Colossae and to Philemon (preferably at one sitting), noting everything we learn about:
 - a. Epaphras;
 - b. Tychicus;
 - c. Onesimus;
 - d. Philemon;
 - e. the circumstances of the recipients of the letters;
 - f. Paul's purpose in writing these letters.