

New Testament Literature: Colossians and Philemon

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson examines the close relationship between Paul's letters to the Colossians and Philemon, noting their shared provenance in Colossae. Addressing Colossians, Mathewson utilizes mirror reading to identify a false teaching characterized by legalistic asceticism and Jewish mysticism, demonstrating how Paul counters this heresy by asserting the unqualified supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. Turning to Philemon, he explores the social dynamics surrounding the runaway slave Onesimus, highlighting Paul's use of tactful persuasion and the genre of a letter of recommendation to urge reconciliation. Ultimately, the lecture illustrates how the gospel transcends rigid ancient cultural and social barriers through love, forgiveness, and new creation identity in Christ.

Outline

I. Introduction and Relationship Between Colossians and Philemon

A. Historical and Geographical Context

1. Canonical placement vs. chronological writing order
2. Shared provenance in Colossae and simultaneous dispatch
3. Common key figures mentioned across both epistles (e.g., Onesimus)

B. Target Audiences

1. Colossians: Addressed to the broader network of house churches in Colossae
2. Philemon: Addressed to a specific house church meeting in Philemon's home

II. The Problem in Colossae: Combating False Teaching

A. Methodology: Mirror Reading

1. Reconstructing the opponents' teaching from Paul's counterarguments
2. Evaluating mixed signals within the textual evidence

B. Nature of the Colossian Heresy

1. Elements of Jewish legalism and ritual purity
2. Ascetic practices ('do not handle, do not taste, do not touch')
3. Mystical and apocalyptic visionary elements (worship of angels)
4. Identification as a form of apocalyptic, Essene, or Qumran-type Jewish mysticism rather than pagan syncretism

C. Inefficacy of Ascetic Regulations

1. Human commands that perish with use
2. Appearance of wisdom and self-imposed piety
3. Absolute failure in checking self-indulgence or fleshly desires

III. Paul's Solution: The Supremacy of Christ and Life in Union with Him

A. Christological Foundation

1. Christ as the image of the invisible God and Creator of all things
2. The unqualified supremacy and total sufficiency of Jesus Christ
3. Refuting false teaching by exalting Christ as the sole head

B. Union with Christ as the Basis for Ethics

1. Shared death and resurrection with Christ ('seeking things above')
2. Ethical transformation vs. quasi-mystical withdrawal
3. Putting off vice and clothing oneself with Christian virtues

C. Creation Theology and the New Humanity

1. Renewal in knowledge according to the image of the Creator (Genesis 1–2 background)
2. Jesus as the true image (New Adam) restoring what Adam corrupted
3. Already / Not Yet tension expressed in the indicative ('you have died/put on') and imperative ('put to death/put on')

IV. The Letter to Philemon: Reconstructing the Situation

A. Literary Genre and Structure

1. The shortest and most personal letter in the Pauline corpus
2. Features of an ancient First-Century Letter of Recommendation
3. Tactical persuasion and social reciprocity dynamics

B. Historical Reconstructions of Onesimus and Philemon

1. View 1 (Traditional): Onesimus as a fugitive slave fleeing to prison in Rome
2. View 2: Onesimus sent intentionally by the Colossian church to serve Paul
3. View 3 (Mathewson's preferred): Onesimus seeking Paul as a mediator/arbitrator during a dispute

V. Social Transformation and the Theological Impact of the Gospel

A. Paul's Diplomatic Strategy

1. Appealing from love rather than commanding via apostolic authority
2. Utilizing familial language (child, father, brother) to redefine identity
3. Subtle request for Philemon to release Onesimus for gospel ministry

B. Gospel Impact on Cultural and Social Distinctions

1. Common participation and partnership in faith (koinonia)
2. Overcoming master-slave and socio-economic divisions in Christ
3. Mutual love, forgiveness, and equality within the body of believers