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Editor's Preface

Commentaries have specific aims, and this series is no exception. Designed for serious pastors and teachers of the Bible, the Pillar commentaries seek above all to make clear the text of Scripture as we have it. The scholars writing these volumes interact with the most important informed contemporary debate, but avoid getting mired in undue technical detail. Their ideal is a blend of rigorous exegesis and exposition, with an eye alert both to biblical theology and the contemporary relevance of the Bible, without confusing the commentary and the sermon.

The rationale for this approach is that the vision of “objective scholarship” (a vain chimera) may actually be profane. God stands over against us; we do not stand in judgment of him. When God speaks to us through his Word, those who profess to know him must respond in an appropriate way, and that is certainly different from a stance in which the scholar projects an image of autonomous distance. Yet this is no surreptitious appeal for uncontrolled subjectivity. The writers of this series aim for an evenhanded openness to the text that is the best kind of “objectivity” of all.

If the text is God’s Word, it is appropriate that we respond with reverence, a certain fear, a holy joy, a questing obedience. These values should be reflected in the way Christians write. With these values in place, the Pillar commentaries will be warmly welcomed not only by pastors, teachers, and students, but by general readers as well.

* * *

For many years Doug Moo and I served on the same faculty. His move from Trinity to Wheaton, however much a gain for the latter, was a per-

EDITOR'S PREFACE

sonal loss. Mercifully, we have continued to collaborate on various projects, and he is surely among the two of three scholars with whom I am most happy to work in close association. Readers of this series will already be familiar with his Pillar commentary on James — and that after writing, for another series, what is still the best English-language commentary on Romans.

Colossians and Philemon speak powerfully to many issues in the twenty-first century. What has consumed a great deal of energy in contemporary scholarship on these epistles, however, has often been the construction of plausible “backgrounds” that then determine (I almost said “domesticate”) the interpretation of the documents. These backgrounds are now so plentiful and so diverse that the corresponding interpretations are equally plentiful. One of the many strengths that Dr. Moo brings to this commentary is an ability to evaluate the relative merits of diverse appeals, and even to point out what one cannot know when the evidence is not all that secure — and then to work carefully through the text in an exegetical and theological manner to make clear what the text itself does say. All of this is couched in lucid prose with transparent hints as to the bearing of the biblical texts on today’s church. Anyone who reads through this commentary will emerge with a stronger grasp of what is disclosed in these two letters. I shall not be surprised if it becomes a “standard” among pastors for many years to come. And once again I am deeply indebted to a friend.

D. A. CARSON

Author's Preface

Writing this commentary felt like coming home. The first book I studied in Greek was Colossians, in a class in New Testament Exegesis at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1972. The notes from that class are the bottom layer (deeply buried now, alas) of this commentary. I have also had the opportunity to teach Colossians in academic settings and to teach it and preach it in several churches. All these experiences, and the things that I learned from those who studied with me, have fed my interpretation of this great letter. Philemon I have studied and taught less. But I do remember a series of three sermons on the book that I preached at a summer conference in the 1980s, and I surprised myself by basically confirming many of the points that I made about this book at that time.

I want to express appreciation to research assistants (and colleagues) Matt Harmon, Elisee Ouoba, and Laurie Norris for help with bibliography and proofreading. My wife, Jenny, read the entire MS in its last stages and offered invaluable suggestions about content (perhaps I should have listed her as coauthor!). I am also grateful to my former colleague Don Carson for allowing me to contribute this volume to the Pillar series. I dedicate this book to Murray J. Harris. He was my professor for that 1972 Colossians class, and his teaching in that class, elaborated and put into written form in his very useful exegetical commentary, has been foundational to my own thinking about Colossians. But he has taught me even more by his example as a scholar and a Christian gentleman. I am grateful to have studied under him and to have served with him.

DOUGLAS J. MOO

Introduction to Colossians

Paul's letter to the Colossians has had an impact on Christian theology and practice out of proportion to its size. Christian thinkers since the patristic period have turned to its teaching about Jesus' role in creation and his preeminence over the church to formulate their Christology. Paul's warnings about people who insist on following certain kinds of rules as basic to spiritual growth have been cited by theologians and laypeople alike to hold up the principle of Christian liberty. And the paraenetic section of the letter, though brief, is typified by a collection of broad ethical principles that have provided significant guidance for believers seeking to translate their commitment to the Lord Jesus into practice. In the pages that follow, we will try to describe as accurately as we can just what this small but powerful letter has to say on these issues, as well as the many others touched on in the letter. Our concern will be to discern what this portion of God's Word has to say to Christians today.

But this goal can be attained only as we carefully and patiently describe what this letter would have meant in its first-century context. As a letter, Colossians is an "occasional" document whose meaning and significance are closely related to (even if they are not finally limited to) its circumstances. Our first task, then, will be to describe these circumstances as the necessary context within which the meaning of the text can be uncovered. Determining these circumstances is, however, particularly complicated in the case of Colossians. For the place of the letter in early Christianity is a matter of considerable dispute. Many scholars are convinced that the letter was written not by Paul but by a follower of his after his death. If this were the case, it would skew our conclusions about the meaning of both a number of specific texts as well as about the overall theological significance of the letter. A second particularly complicating

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matter in “locating” Colossians accurately is the nature of the false teaching to which Paul is responding. We will deal with both these key issues, as well as several others less debated and less significant in the following sections. Six questions will structure our discussion: To whom was the letter written? Who wrote it? When and where was it written? Why was it written? What is the letter about? And how is it organized?

I. TO WHOM WAS THE LETTER WRITTEN? COLOSSAE AND THE COLOSSIANS

In his classic commentary on the letter, J. B. Lightfoot claimed that “Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed.”¹ Colossae had not always been so insignificant a city. Located in the Lycus River valley of west-central Asia Minor, Colossae was apparently the most important city in its vicinity in the fourth and third centuries before Christ. It was known as being the center of a thriving textile industry, to the point that a certain kind of high-quality dark red wool was known as “Colossian wool.” Its prominence was due especially to its location at the crossroads of two well-traveled highways: one that ran east and west, connecting the coastal cities of Ephesus (120 miles to the west) and Sardis with the interior east; and another running north and south. When, however, the latter road was moved west to pass through Laodicea, Colossae began to decline. In Paul’s day it was not as large or important as the neighboring cities of Laodicea (twelve miles to the west) or Hierapolis (fifteen miles northwest). Both these communities also had Christian churches (see Col. 2:1), and Paul wrote a (now lost) letter to the Laodiceans (see Col. 4:16). An earthquake devastated the area sometime in the early 60s.² We know that Laodicea was quickly rebuilt (as Tacitus suggests; and see Rev. 3:14-22, probably written in the 90s) and that Colossae eventually was rebuilt also, though we do not know how quickly. The city has been in ruins (which have never been excavated) for centuries.

Geographically, Colossae belonged to the region of Phrygia and in Paul’s day was part of the Roman province of Asia. Its location on an im-

1. Lightfoot, 16.

2. The Roman historian Tacitus refers to an earthquake that destroyed Laodicea in A.D. 60-61 (*Annals* 14.27), while the Christian historian Eusebius mentions an earthquake that devastated Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae in A.D. 64 or so (*Chronicle* 1.21-22). They are probably referring to the same event. Lightfoot was open to the possibility that Eusebius’s date might be correct (38-40), but we cannot know for sure.