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Literature on Colossians

RONALD L. TYLER

The following readings give consideration to four major concerns when studying Colossians. What is the trouble at Colossae (2.8–23)? What is the Colossians' view, or the correct view, of the person of Christ (1.15–20)? How does the Christian life appear in light of this letter, especially in the household codes of 3.1–4.1? What is the theology of Colossians?

DICTIONARY ARTICLES

The following dictionary articles are recommended for orientation to the study of Colossians: James Dunn in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, I, 2006, 702-706; Victor Paul Furnish in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1, 1992, 1090-1096; F. F. Bruce, *New International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, One, 1979, 733-735; and P. T. O'Brien's entry in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 1993, 147-153, is a must read. J. B. Maclean's article on Colossians in the *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, A-J*, 1999, 206-210, surveys the history of the interpretation of Colossians.

THEOLOGICAL WORDBOOKS

Alan Richardson edited *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, 1955, and it is essential reading. J. J. von Allmen edited *A Companion to the Bible*, 1958, which has fewer, but longer, articles than Richardson. William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, 1974, is practical and includes an index to his popular *Daily Study Bible* series. Donald Gowan edited *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, 2003. Colin Brown edited *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* in four volumes, 1986, with the fourth containing an index volume. Ministers and teachers would be well-served by these works.

COLLECTIONS OF ARTICLES

Among several collections, these two deal appropriately with the problem at Colossae. Fred Francis and Wayne Meeks edited a series of articles relating to the trouble at Colossae that remains a standard: *Conflict at Colossae*, 1973. It can be updated with C. E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 1996.

COMMENTARIES

Three studies by Ralph Martin stand out: *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, 1991, in the *Interpretation* series, where his comments on Colossians are brief, but often insightful for the preacher/teacher. He also wrote the volume on Colossians in the *New Century Bible*, 1982, which is aimed at a middle level audience. His earlier work, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty*, 1972, targets the preacher/teacher.

William Barclay's *The All-Sufficient Christ*, 1963, explores ten topics relating to Colossians. Especially valuable are topics four and five regarding the trouble at Colossae, and six and seven relating to the person and work of Christ. This book is separate from the volume in his *Daily Study Bible* series, which is one of the better volumes in that popular set. A. M. Hunter's contribution to *The Layman's Bible Commentary*, 22,

1959, is scholarly popularizing at its best. It is highly recommended because he brought scholarship to the average reader in clearly written language. F. F. Bruce in the *New International Commentary*, 1984, skillfully applies traditional exegesis, although it is a bit thin on the theological side. Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians*, 1982, is abreast of the secondary literature published prior to that time. Schweizer gives clear and pertinent comments and has some good illustrative remarks which the preacher/teacher might use. N. T. Wright replaced an earlier volume in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, 1986, and it is clearly written. The older work of F. W. Beare in *The Interpreter's Bible*, 11, 1955, is still worthy reading. Marianne Meye Thompson covered Colossians and Philemon in the *Two Horizons New Testament Commentary*, 2005. She uses somewhat traditional exegesis and then includes a theological section following each unit. There is much practical material here, as she interacts with Biblical and systematic theological issues. However, I am not convinced that the trouble at Colossae relates totally to Jewish issues. I also differ here with James Dunn, who holds a similar view. The particular form of the problem described in this letter was likely local to Colossae, although it drew from many divergent sources.

This final group is based on the Greek text, but should not be neglected. C. F. D. Moule's *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* in *Cambridge Greek Testament*, 1957, has become a minor classic. An English translation preceded each section. Peter T. O'Brien's contribution in *The Word Biblical Commentary*, 44, 1982, is the best overall commentary, and he is theologically sensitive. His careful study of the Greek text is reported in clear language. The book is encyclopedic in nature and is current on the secondary literature to its day. E. Lohse penned the contribution in the scholarly *Hermeneia* series. Despite its age and rejection of Pauline authorship, it is filled with useful comments. It is targeted to the very serious student/scholar. He cites parallels in the original languages but provides English translations. Murray J. Harris in *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*, 1991, does a thorough analysis of the Greek text. James Dunn's contribution to *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, 1996, is one of the finest recent works. He views the trouble at Colossae as primarily Jewish.

These studies will open Colossians to you along the four lines suggested at the beginning of this piece. Once you have learned what the text originally meant, you will be in a position to see how it relates to life today. To that end, happy studying, remembering the dictum of Johann Albecht Bengel (1687-1752): "*Te totum applica ad textum: rem total applica ad te.*" Apply yourself totally to the text: apply it totally to yourself.

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