

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

There are endless church models out there globally, almost all in America, on what is an ideal church:

- The Seeker Friendly Church
- Purpose Driven Church
- Gospel Community Church—Acts 29 type young postmodern churches
- The Healthy Church (usually about 8 characteristics)
- The Simple Church model
- The House Church model
- Saturation Church Planting/CPM/DMM model
- The Cell Church model
- The Organic Church model

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

What we are presenting today is not a model. It is Christ's plan for His churches. We can build many cultural models upon Christ's plan, yet all of the models I listed above have significant deficiencies, as you will see.

I deal with all these models every year, all over the world, and know them well.

Some people call us "The BILD Model." BILD is not a model. It is a process of going back and understanding Christ's plan for His churches and helping movements all over the world build complete models for their churches in their own culture.

These models all grew up in the last half of the 20th century in response to the massive decline of the Church in the West and the massive expansion of the Church in the Global South.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

These 4 small letters of Paul, his middle letters, give us a complete picture of Christ's instructions for His churches from which we can build practical models in our cultural situations around the world and across the centuries.

Ephesians is the manifesto.

Colossians and Philemon put the manifesto in action amongst a cluster of churches.

Philippians gives us the guidelines for participating in the progress of the gospel following these instructions.

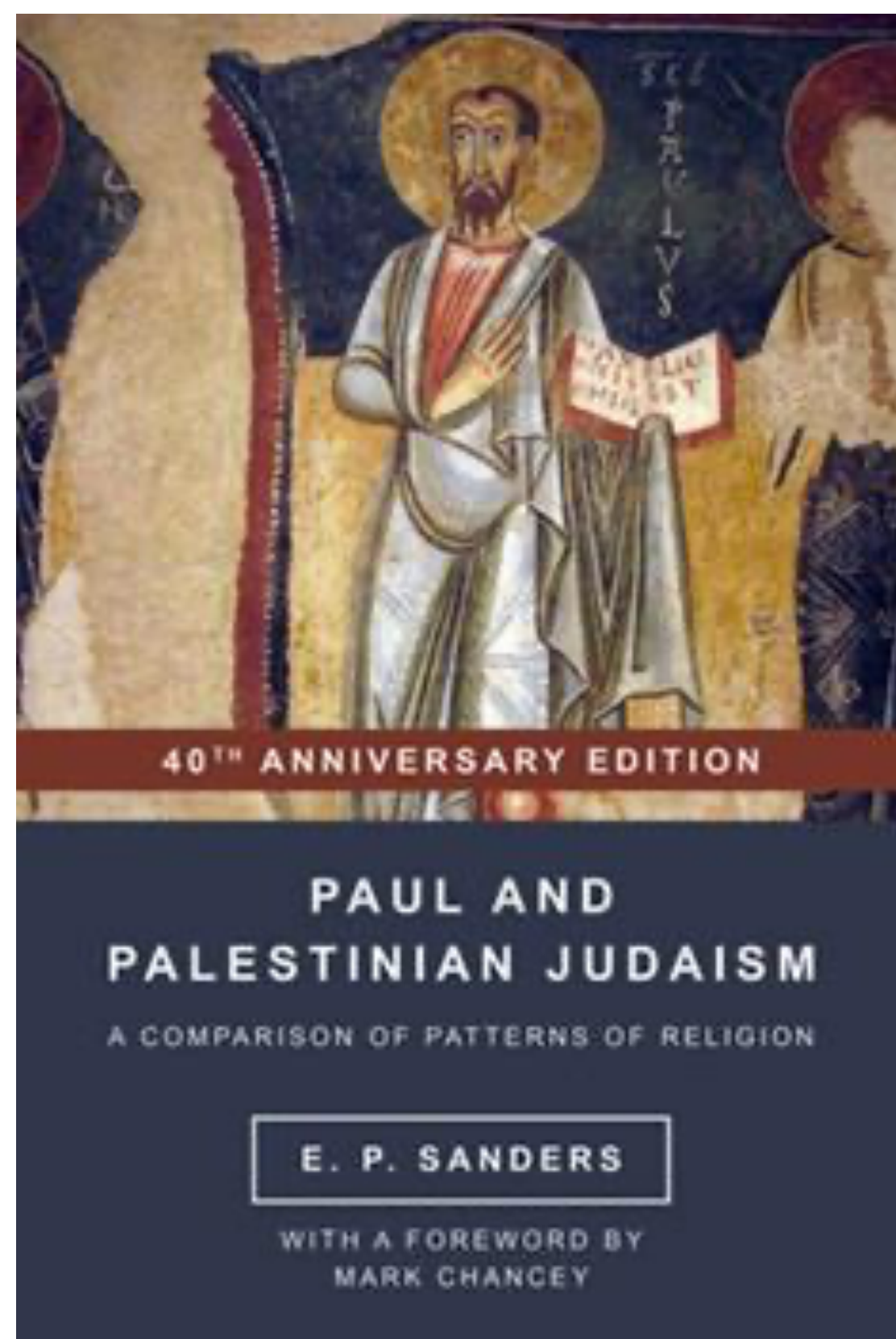
Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Issue: Intent of Colossians

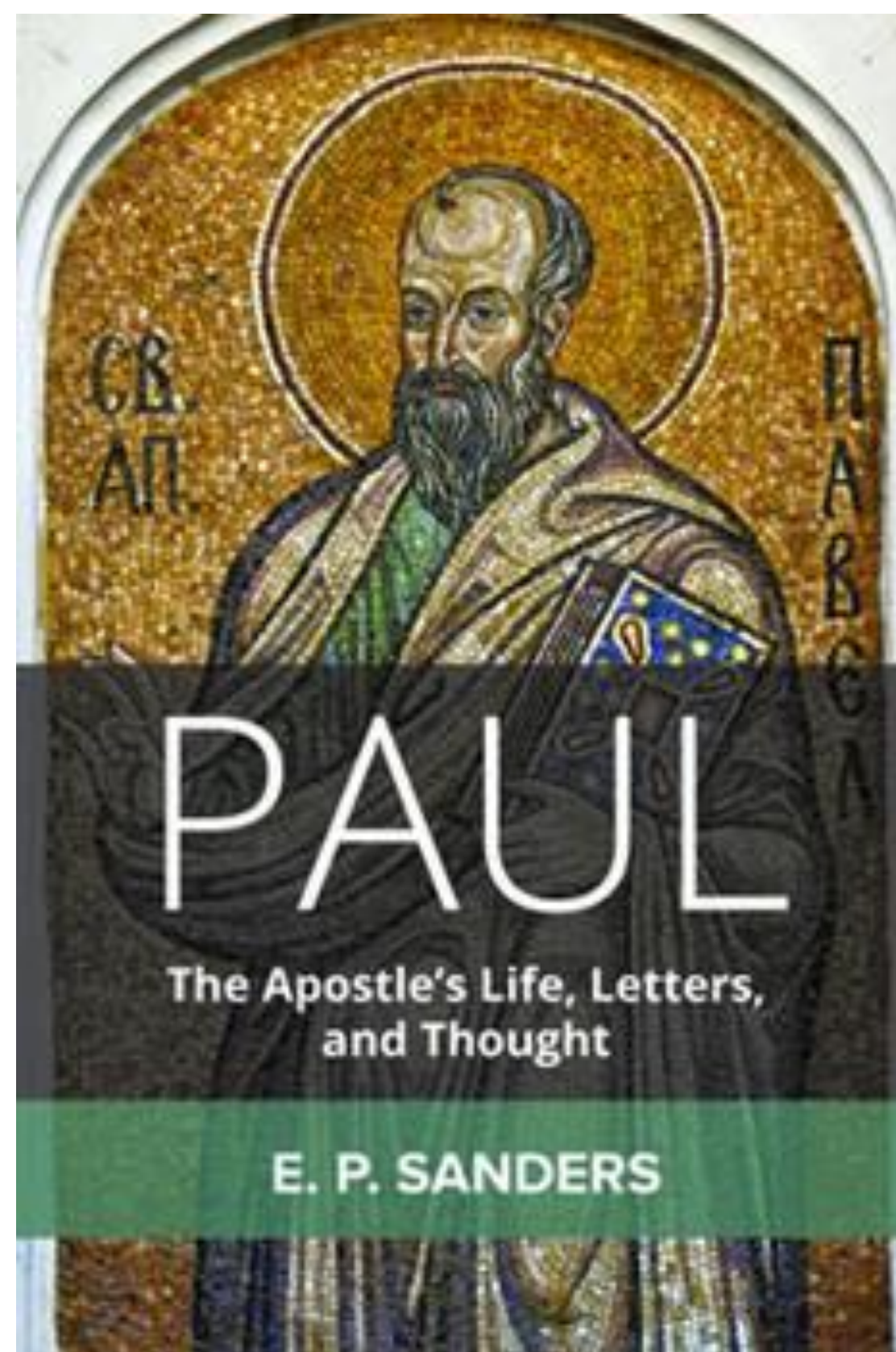
Questions:

1. In what sense is Colossians a logical follow-up to the Ephesians manifesto on the Church? Why is it so similar to Ephesians? What was Paul up to in writing this letter?
2. What does it look like to be a church aligned with Christ's grand strategy—the Church?
3. Christ's Church is a network of churches, as seen in this circular letter to Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. So what does it look like to put Christ's plan into action?
4. According to Paul, what are the core elements to becoming a mature, fully established church, aligned with Christ's grand strategy for His Church? Why do these elements need to be at the core of every contemporary cultural model?

New Perspective on Paul—Liberal

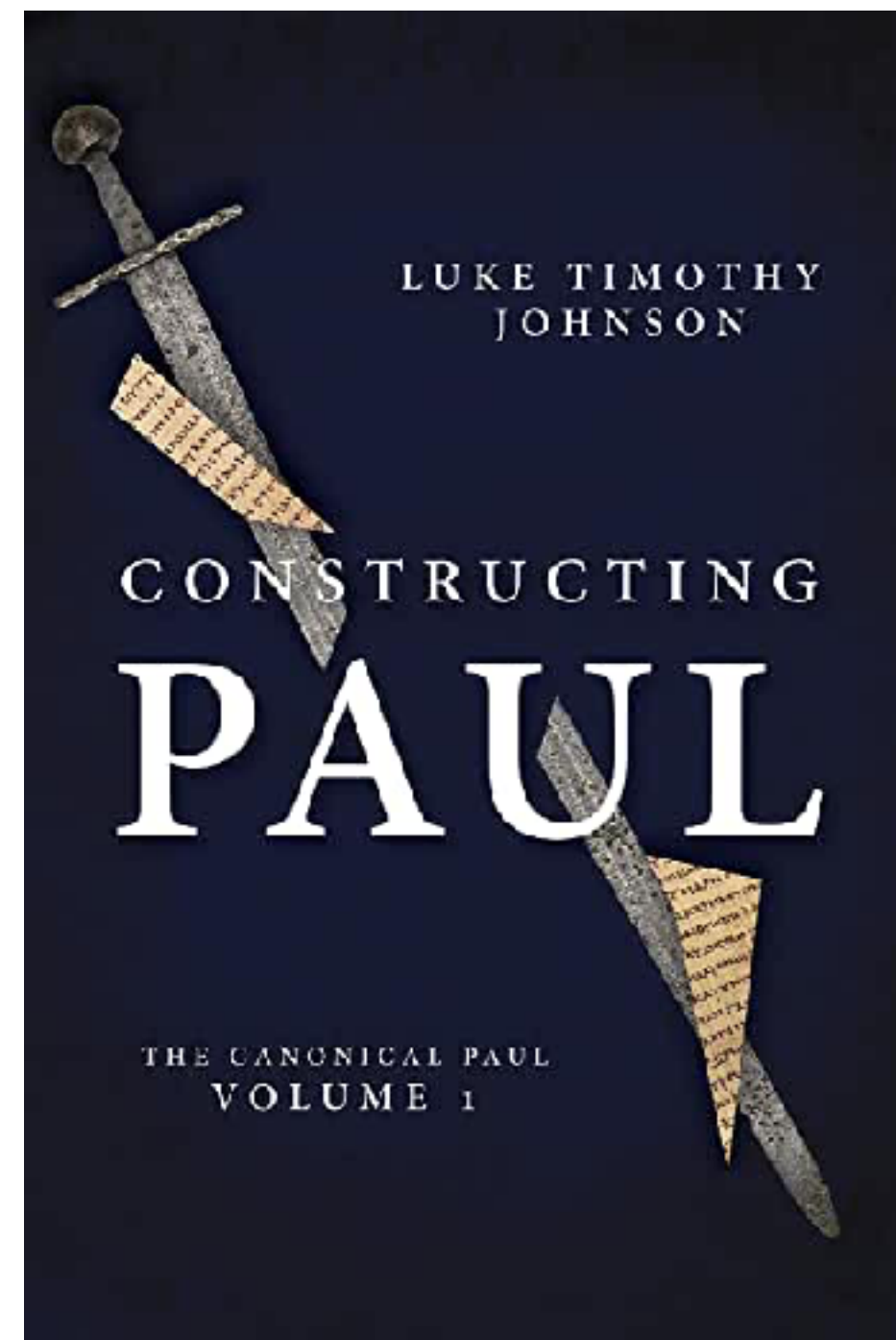


1977

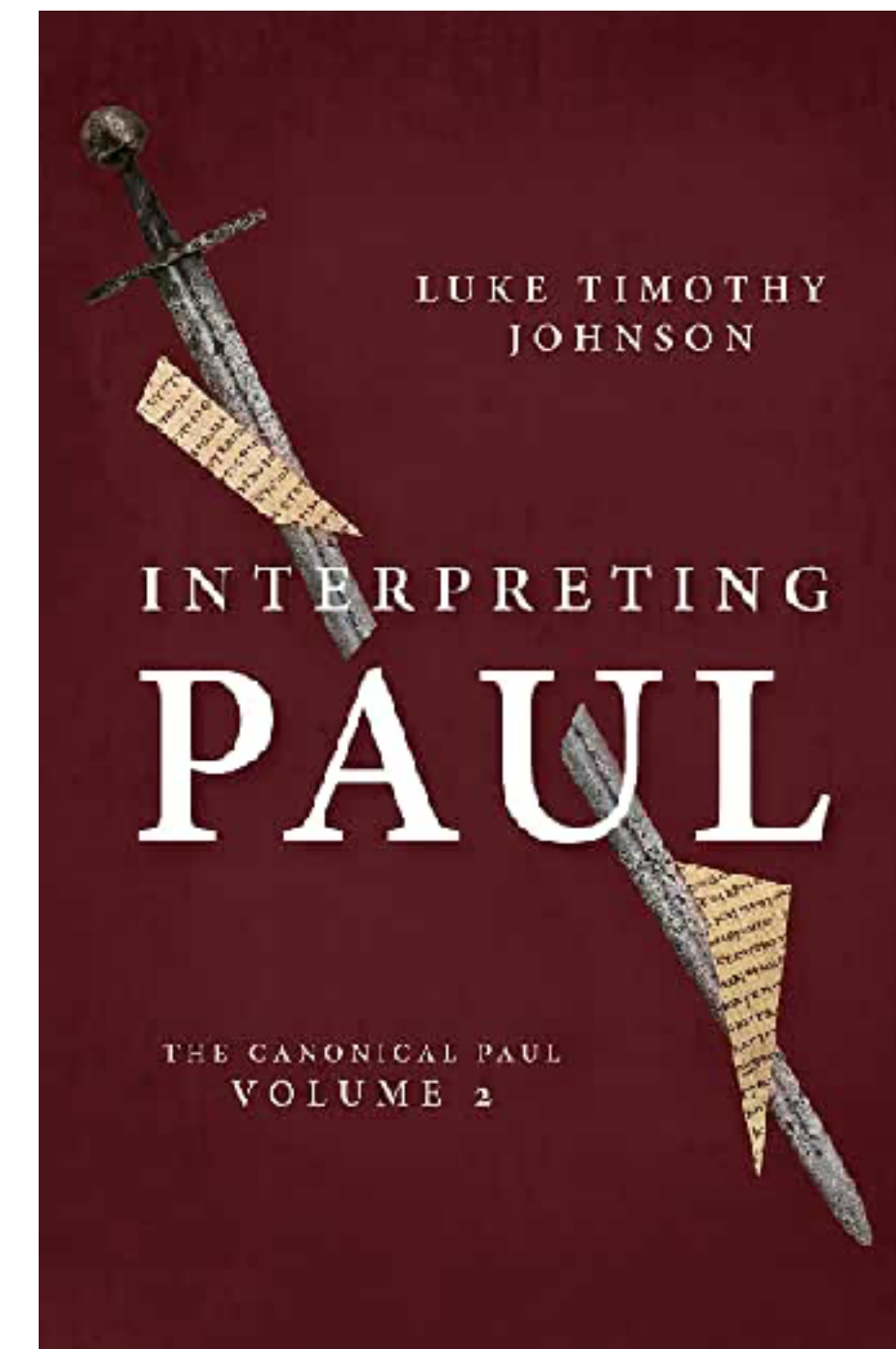


2015

New Perspective on Paul—Catholic

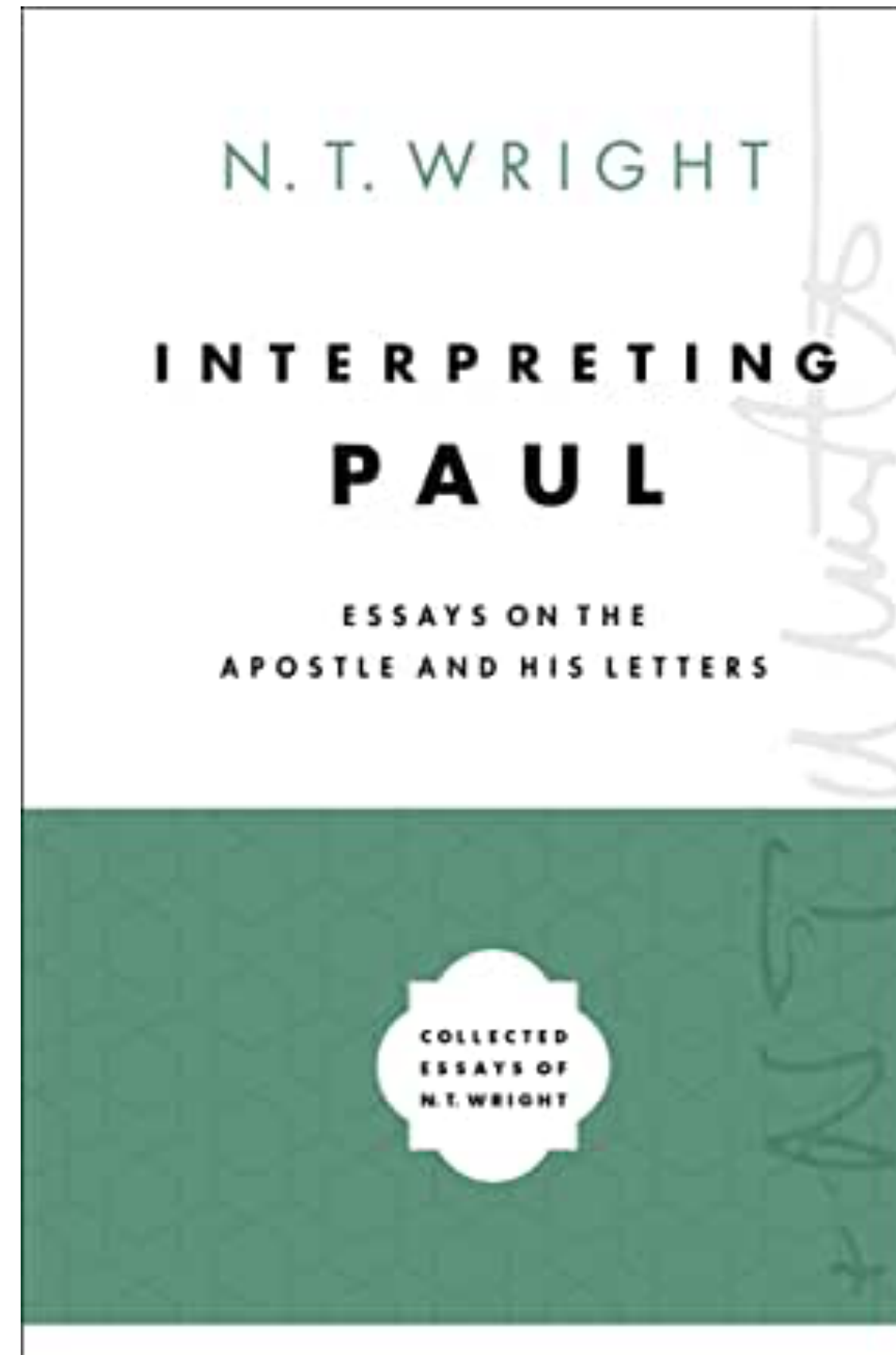


2020

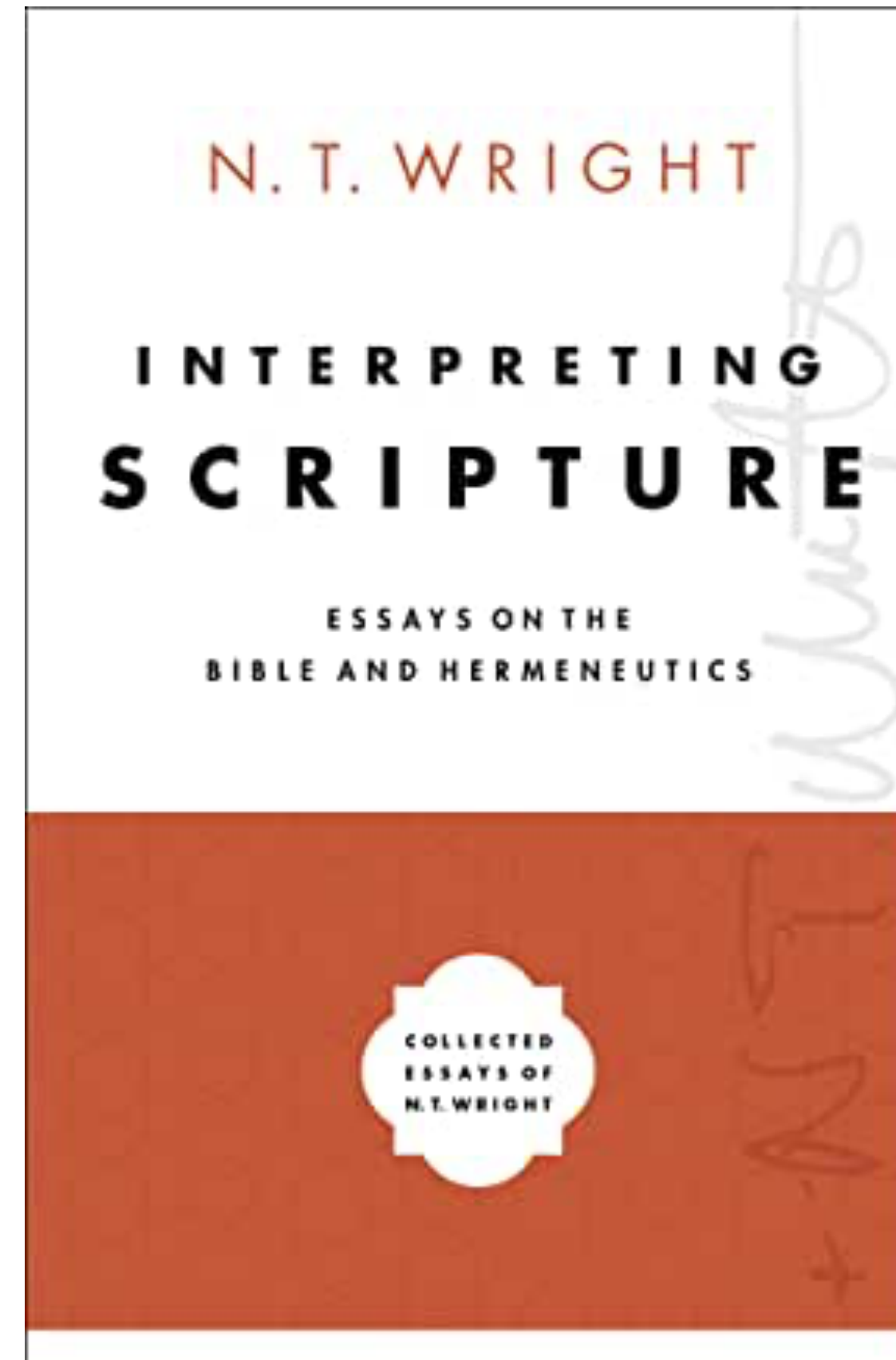


2021

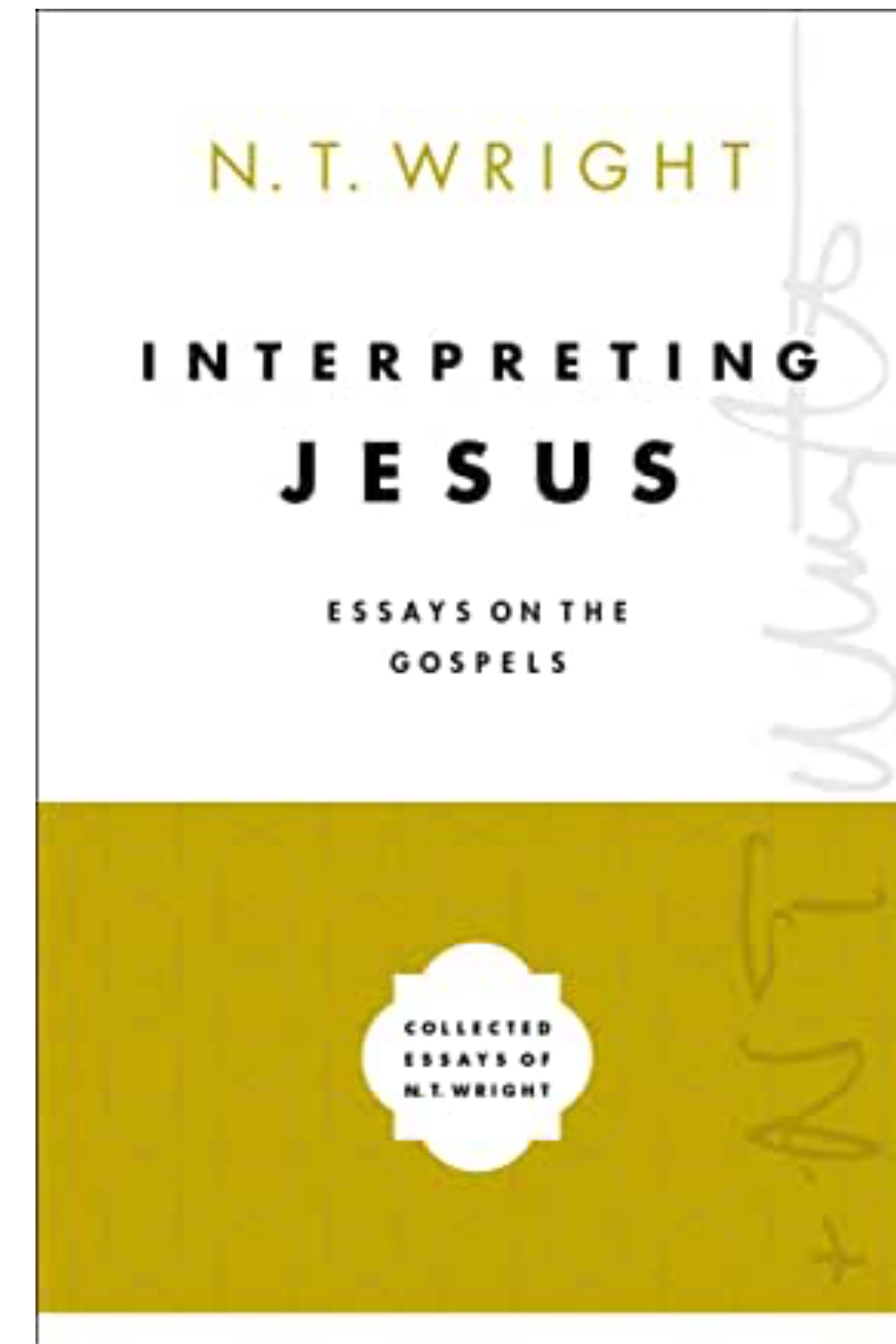
New Perspective on Paul—Evangelical



2020



2020



2020

New Perspective on Paul

Interpreting III: New Perspective on Paul, A Radical Hermeneutical Turn

Units:

Unit 1: A New Perspective in Hermeneutics

Unit 2: Interpreting Paul

Unit 3: Paul and Greco-Roman Research

Unit 4: Practicing Pauline Theology in Culture

Unit 5: Toward a Post-Perspective Old and New Testament Theology

New Perspective on Paul

Old Perspective on Paul

Sanders: “Paul was a coherent, but not systematic, thinker” (like systematic theologians since the Reformation)

Johnson: (What) “they have been taught has been abstracted from certain dialogues and arranged into a logical system that is nowhere to be found as such in the dialogues themselves.” (Plato)

Wright: “not just bits and pieces, miscellaneous topoi which just happen to turn up in these irrelevant ‘contingent’ contexts like oddly shaped pearls on an irrelevant string.”

New Perspective on Paul

Sanders: “Paul as a theological thinker with a coherent viewpoint”

Johnson: “When they actually begin to read the dialogues in all their particularity and complexity, they begin to discover how much exciting and challenging thought has escaped the usual categories.” (Plato)

Wright: “The more time we spend in the careful reading of Paul and in the study of his worldview, his theology, and his aims and intentions, the more he emerges as a deeply coherent thinker. His main themes may well not fit the boxes constructed by later Christian dogmatics of whatever type. They generate their own categories....”

New Perspective on Paul

Old Perspective on Paul

Paul was a systematic theologian like Calvin, but contained unsystematized doctrine that could be systemized by future theologians. But his thought was not organized and fully developed nor fully logical; therefore, it must be made clearer and clearer by highly skilled (Western) systematic theologians.

New Perspective on Paul

Paul was a coherent thinker who did theology in culture amongst his churches, from a framework of fully integrated historical narrative and dense cyclic organizing centers (theological core/topoi). It enables us to do similar theology in culture amongst our churches today, together they make up the essence of Christ's grand strategy.

New Perspective on Paul

Old Perspective on Paul

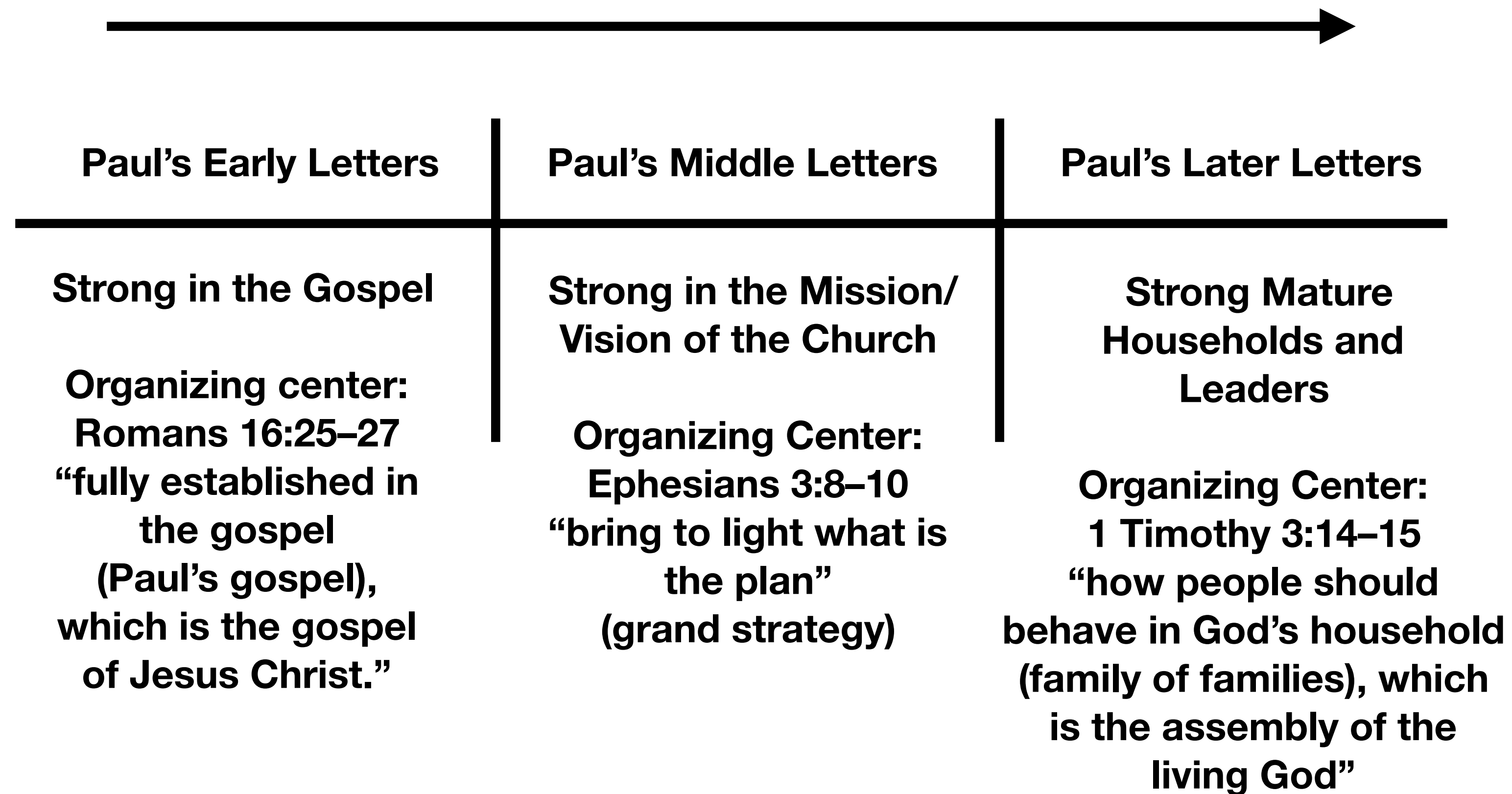
Paul's letters contain miscellaneous, often unrelated topics, that would be useful for future believers, especially in dealing with sin, salvation, and living the Christian life. These topics are a significant part of today's ever growing systematic theologies.

New Perspective on Paul

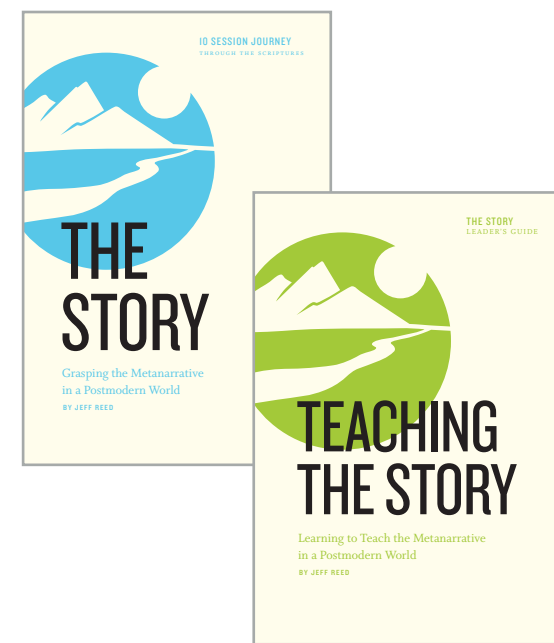
Paul's letters form a coherent, interlocking shape, foundational for churches in any generation to fully understand Christ's grand strategy of the Church being central to His unfolding kingdom and to live in full alignment of that grand strategy.

Paul's Early, Middle, and Later Letters

The Process of Building Strong Churches



New Perspective on Paul



Kerygma
Early Acts
Apostles' Teaching
6 months
Paul: 3 years "night and day"



Didache
Body of Acts
Theology of Paul
1½ years



Full Kerygma
After Acts
Apostles' Gospels
1 year





Paul's Middle Letters

Fully Revealing Christ's Grand Strategy

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In the middle letters, we get a full revelation of Christ's grand strategy after He inaugurated the Kingdom—that is the Church.

We will also look at the letters from the viewpoint of Paul building his global apostolic network, as we began to do in his early letters.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

These middle letters were all written close together (at the end of Acts—20:30), during the 2 years Paul was under house arrest—from February 60 to March 62. Most likely...

Ephesians was written Autumn 60

Colossians and Philemon—Autumn 61

Philippians—early Spring 62

These letters give us the full revelation of the Church. But think of the battles that were fought before this.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

The battle for the gospel went from Autumn A.D. 47, until the writing of Romans in the middle of November 56—ten years

Paul's first confrontation with Peter—Autumn 47 (Gal. 2:1–10)

Peter in Antioch—Autumn 49 (Gal. 2:11–16)

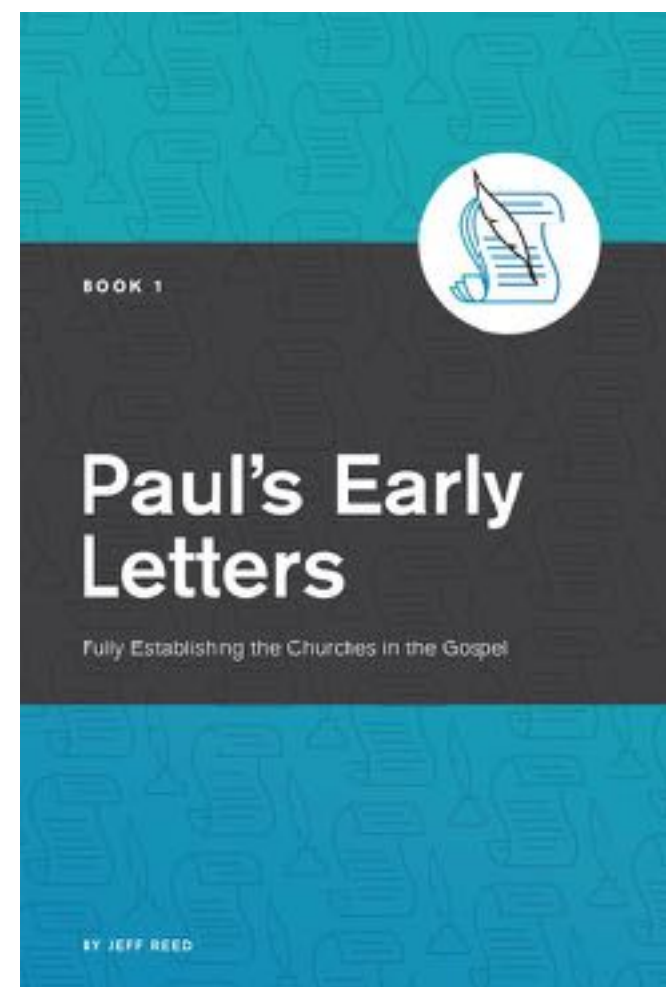
Jerusalem Council—Autumn 49

Then the early letters of Paul—Autumn 49 to Romans in 56

It took Paul a decade to win that argument, which he completed with his Romans manifesto on the gospel.

Now on to his rather compact, full unveiling of the Church.

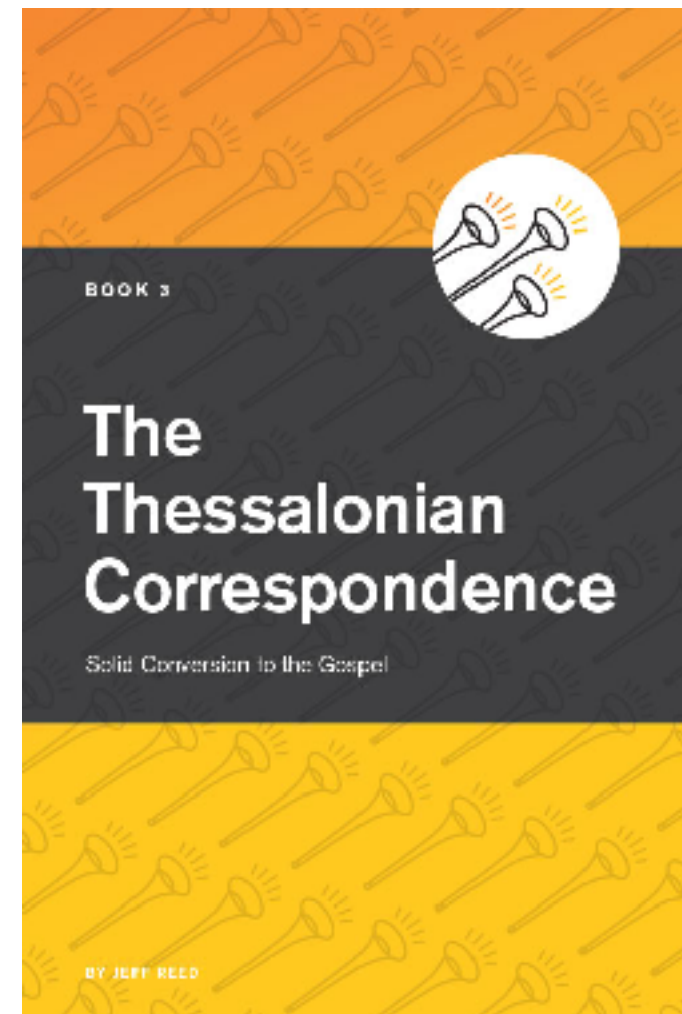
Paul's Early Letters



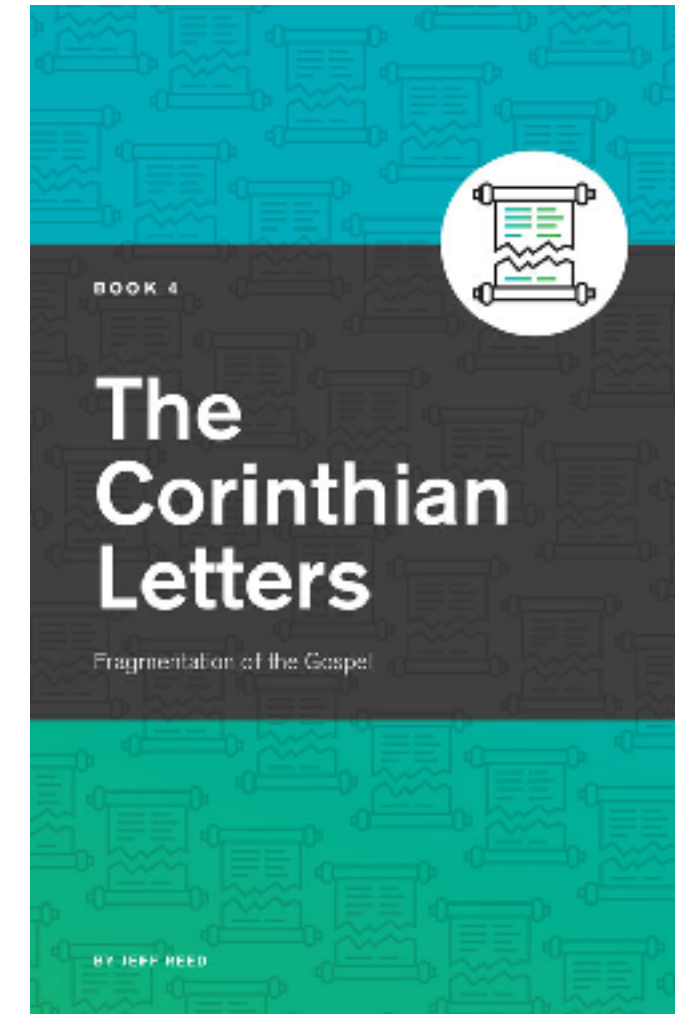
A.D. 49–56



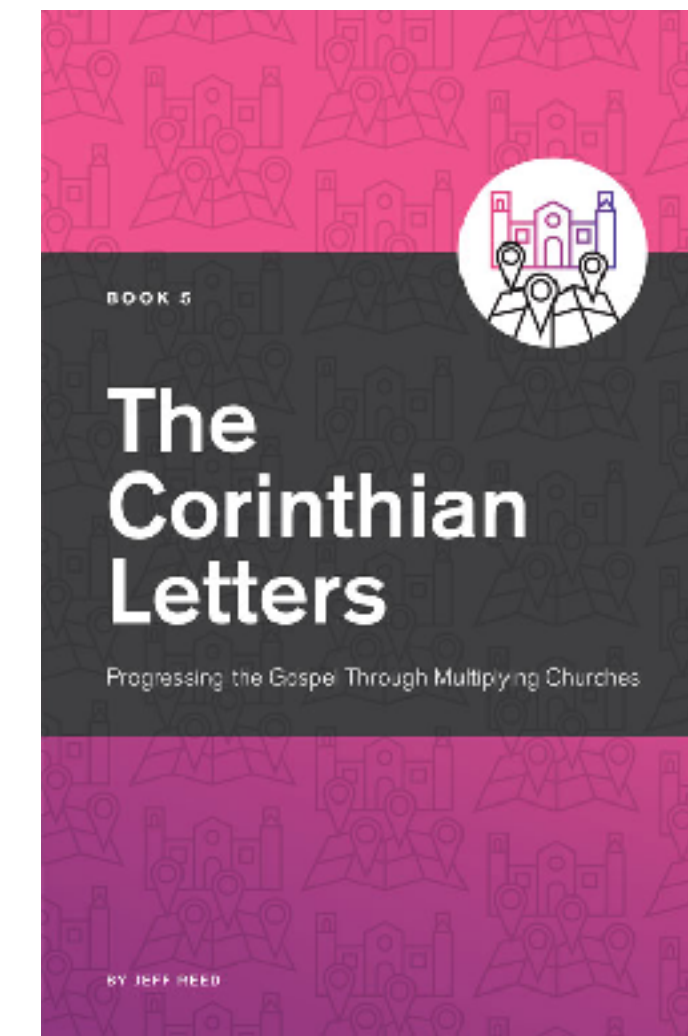
Autumn 49



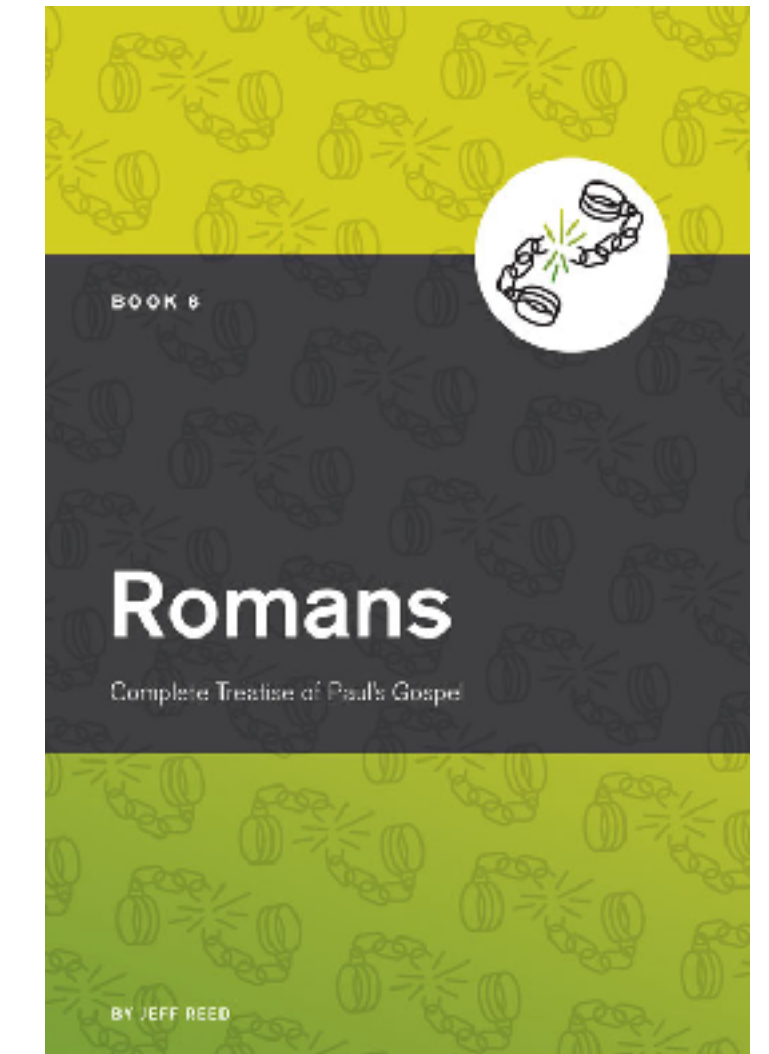
Winter/Summer 51



Sept. 53



June 56



Nov. 56

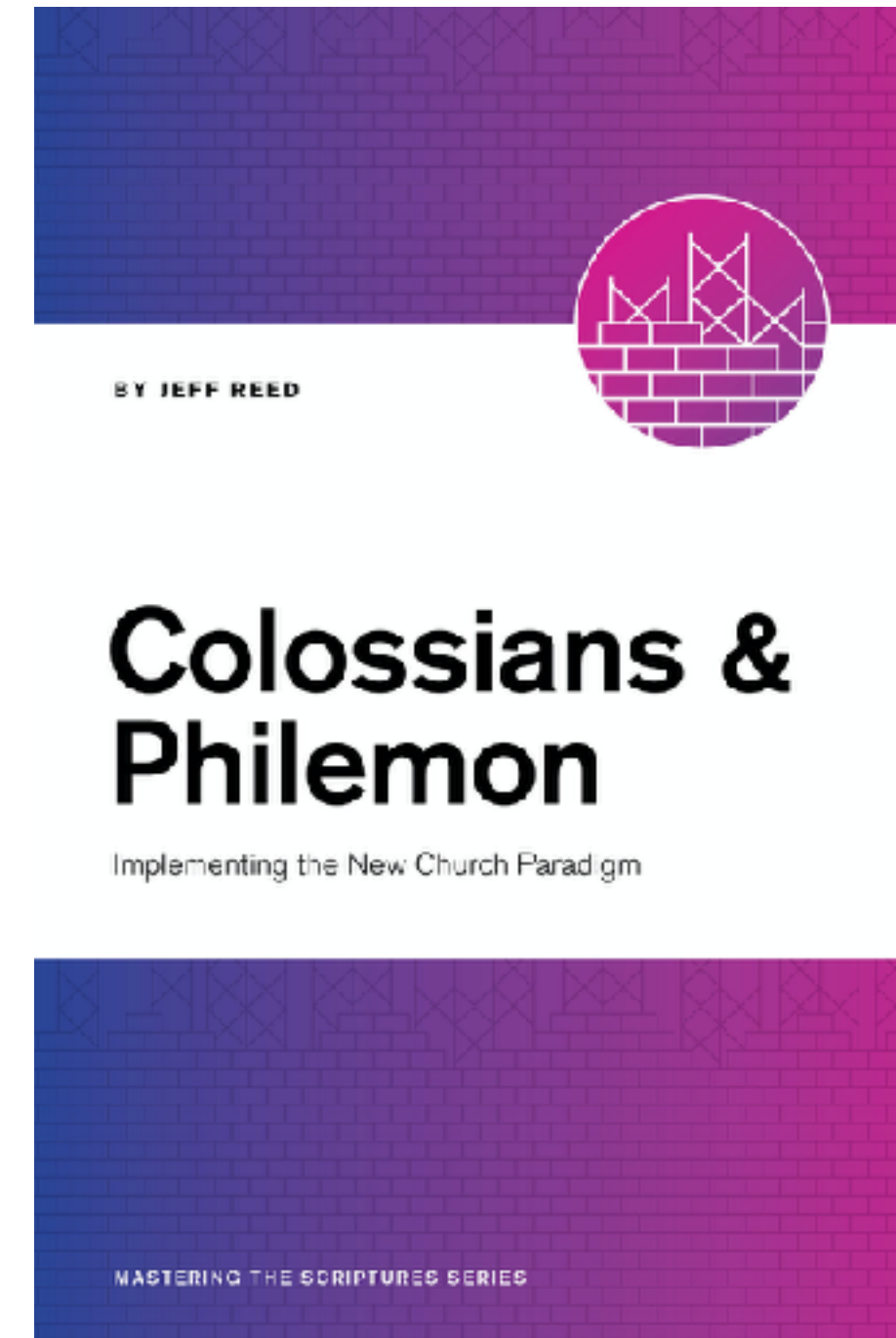
Paul's Middle Letters



Feb. 60 to March 62



Autumn 60



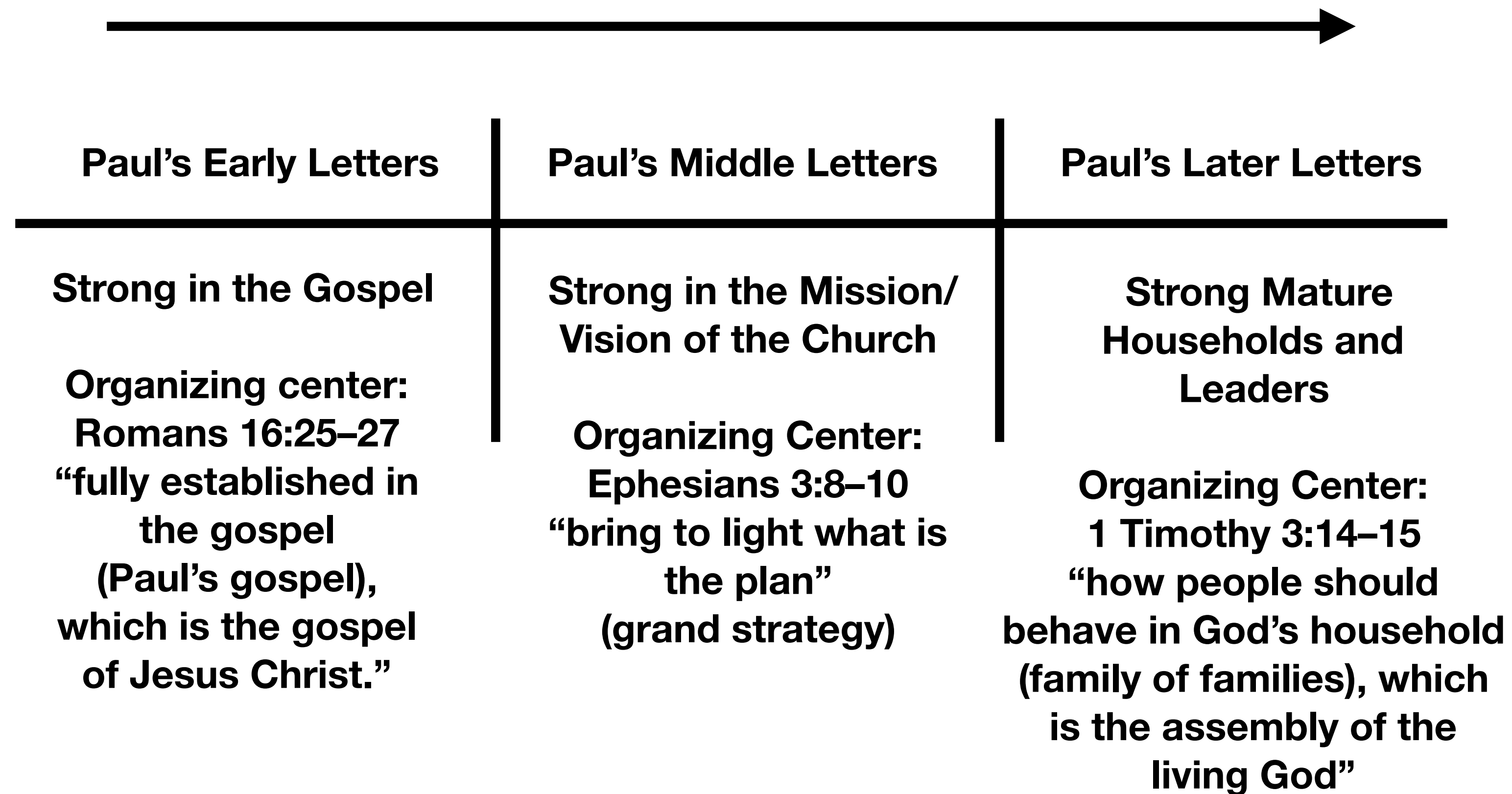
Autumn 61



Spring 62

Paul's Early, Middle, and Later Letters

The Process of Building Strong Churches



Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

These letters were all written close together (at the end of Acts—20:30), during the 2 years Paul was under house arrest—from February 60, to March 62. Most likely...

Ephesians was written Autumn A.D. 60

Colossians and Philemon—Autumn 61

Philippians—early Spring 62

In these letters, we are looking into the heart of Paul's network:

Ephesians—hub churches

Colossians and Philemon—cluster churches

Philippians—node churches

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In these 2 compact years and 4 small letters we get a full revelation of Christ's Church, which had never before been fully revealed.

The organizing center of these letters:

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 3:7–10

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Paul lays out his job description very clearly.

Paul's 2-fold job description:

1. Preach the gospel to the Gentiles (a 10-year battle for the gospel)
2. Fully reveal the heart of Christ's grand strategy—the Church

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Ephesians – Hub Churches

Ephesians: A manifesto revealing Christ's "grand strategy" — the Church — to his key "hub" churches in Ephesus, with special attention to training the elders of this strategic city in the whole plan of Christ, for an entire 3-year period.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Ephesians – Hub Churches

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We will look briefly at 4 key passages in Ephesians this morning:

2:19–21; 3:7–10; 4:1–6; 4:11–16

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In this passage, we begin to build the picture of the Church.

- It is a large household—one big global family.
- It has one foundation—the Apostles and prophets—with Christ as the cornerstone.
- The whole structure is built by Christ—His tools are the Apostles and prophets, an idea we will expand on in a moment.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Paul lays out his job description very clearly.

Paul's 2-fold job description:

1. Preach the gospel to the Gentiles (a 10-year battle for the gospel).
2. Fully reveal the heart of Christ's grand strategy—the Church.

It is Christ's strategy for progressing the gospel. It will be the heart of his unfolding kingdom, and it will stun the rulers and authorities even in the heavenly places. It was a mystery (hidden) until this time.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In this passage we see more about that foundation

- There is just one foundation being laid—one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God—weaving it all together in His great plan for fully realizing His kingdom with Christ on the throne.
- The one hope and one faith are essentially overlapping concepts referring to *the kerygma*—the gospel story, the core of our hope; and the faith is the didache, the teaching, the deposit, the sound doctrine.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

In this final passage, we see how the Church is built and what it does.

- It is built by those gifted leaders—apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers. They equip the saints in the churches to do the work of the ministry—service.
- The saints do the work of the ministry (not hired ministers); and when they are equipped and doing the ministry, the church will mature; and when the church matures fully in Christ, the watching world will see Christ, and it will stun rulers in the heavenly places.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Colossians—Cluster Churches

Colossians: Almost identical letter to Ephesians (along with Philemon), written to the house churches scattered throughout the Lycus Valley (Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis) one year after writing his “manifesto” to the Ephesian churches, to help them at a very practical level to implement the new church paradigm in their network of churches—a model as a framework for the entire history of clusters of churches down through the centuries.

Philemon: To practically illustrate to the network of churches in the Lycus Valley, the importance of Christ's grand strategy of the kingdom through the church, to restructure all their social relationships—including slavery—around the church as a family of families, the household social structure of the church, which was evident in the Greek “republic” ideal of the day but fully realized in the emerging kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Why exactly did Paul write the letter to the Colossians? It is almost identical to Ephesians.

What are its additional contributions that caused it to be chosen to be part of the 13 letters of Paul included in the New Testament—called the Pauline corpus?

We will look at Colossians this morning, and we will complete the answers to these questions when we look at Philemon next week.

To begin to answer these questions, we must read all of chapter 1.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

² To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father

³ In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. ⁷ This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, ⁸ and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Colossians 1:1–8

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:9–14

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— ²³ provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Colossians 1:15–23

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

²⁴ I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. ²⁵ I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

Colossians 1:24–29

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

First, he is introducing himself.

- Paul is an apostle with authority; and Timothy is a key leader, sharing in Paul's authority.
- Epaphras, who brought the Colossians the gospel, is part of Paul's team and reported their faith to him.
- Paul wants to see them secure and steadfast in the faith.
- Paul was given a special commission: to make the Word fully known by revealing the mystery—Christ is the head of the Church, His body, and we are in Him and He in us.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Second, Paul was giving them the big picture.

You can see this in 1:15–20.

1. Christ is everything—from creation until the kingdom is set up—and He is the head of His body, the Church.
2. When you trusted in Christ, your sins were forgiven and you were “transferred into His kingdom” (1:13), specifically His body, the Church, of which He is head, which is His plan for every man becoming mature in Christ—they are in Him and He in them.
3. Through Christ and His body—His Church—God will reconcile all things to Himself, ultimately, setting up the promised kingdom.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Third, he was giving them a part of the big picture that involves them—their cluster of churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

Colossians was key because it was part of a cluster of churches in the Lycus Valley; it was evidently the most strategic of the 3 churches, which included Laodicea and Hierapolis.

They are now part of Paul's network and mission. He is tying them to his mission, which was given to him by Christ.

You can see this in the conclusion of his letter in chapter 4.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

⁷ Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; ⁹ he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

¹⁰ Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him. ¹¹ And Jesus who is called Justus greets you. These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. ¹² Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. ¹³ For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴ Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you. ¹⁵ Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶ And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. ¹⁷ And say to Archippus, “See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.” ¹⁸ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

What was Paul doing at the end of his letter?

- He was introducing them to his team: John Mark, Luke, etc.
- He was building a relationship with them, with all the greetings, including writing the last section by his own hand.
- He was building a cluster network with the 3 cities with the letter exchange and with greetings from the churches of Laodicea.
- He was establishing the practical authority of his team by giving his instructions to his team members for Colossae.

This all becomes a model for building future complex apostolic networks.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Now what about the core body of the letter—2:1–4:12. This is framed in, in 2:1–8.

2:1 For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. ² I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Paul wants to see them established in the faith—rooted and built up in the faith. He is concerned about the “firmness of their faith,” 2:5, and them being “established in the faith, just as you were taught,” 2:7.

There are two philosophies, two traditions, two sets of “first principles” in view here: those of the world and those of Christ. The body of the letter lays out these two sets:

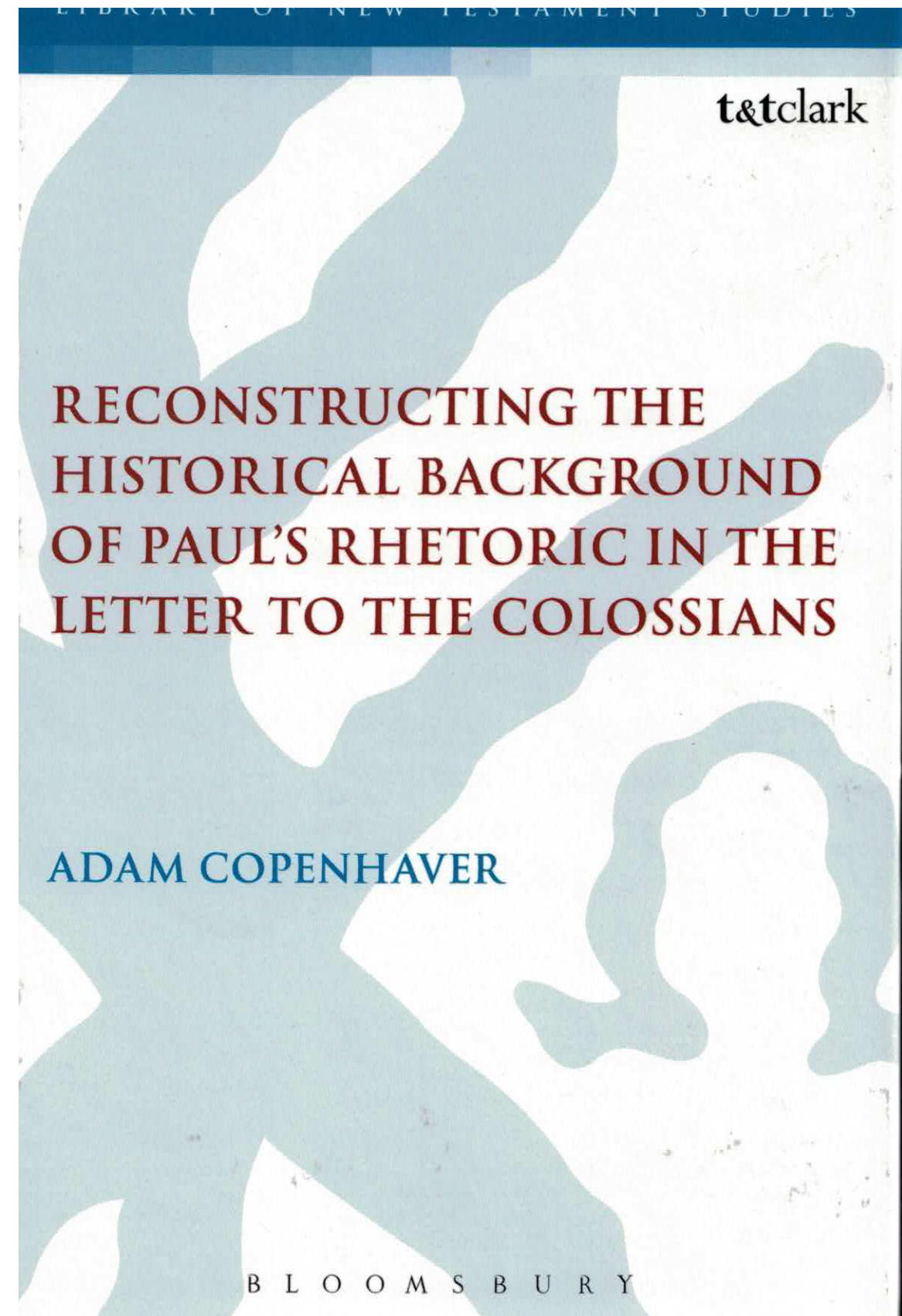
“the first principles” (core tradition, philosophy, teaching) of the world 2:16–23

There were two general philosophies of the world these churches were facing—Judaism and Greek philosophy and religions. Paul reviews their general principles.

“the first principles of Christ” (authoritative tradition, philosophy, teaching) 3:1–4:6

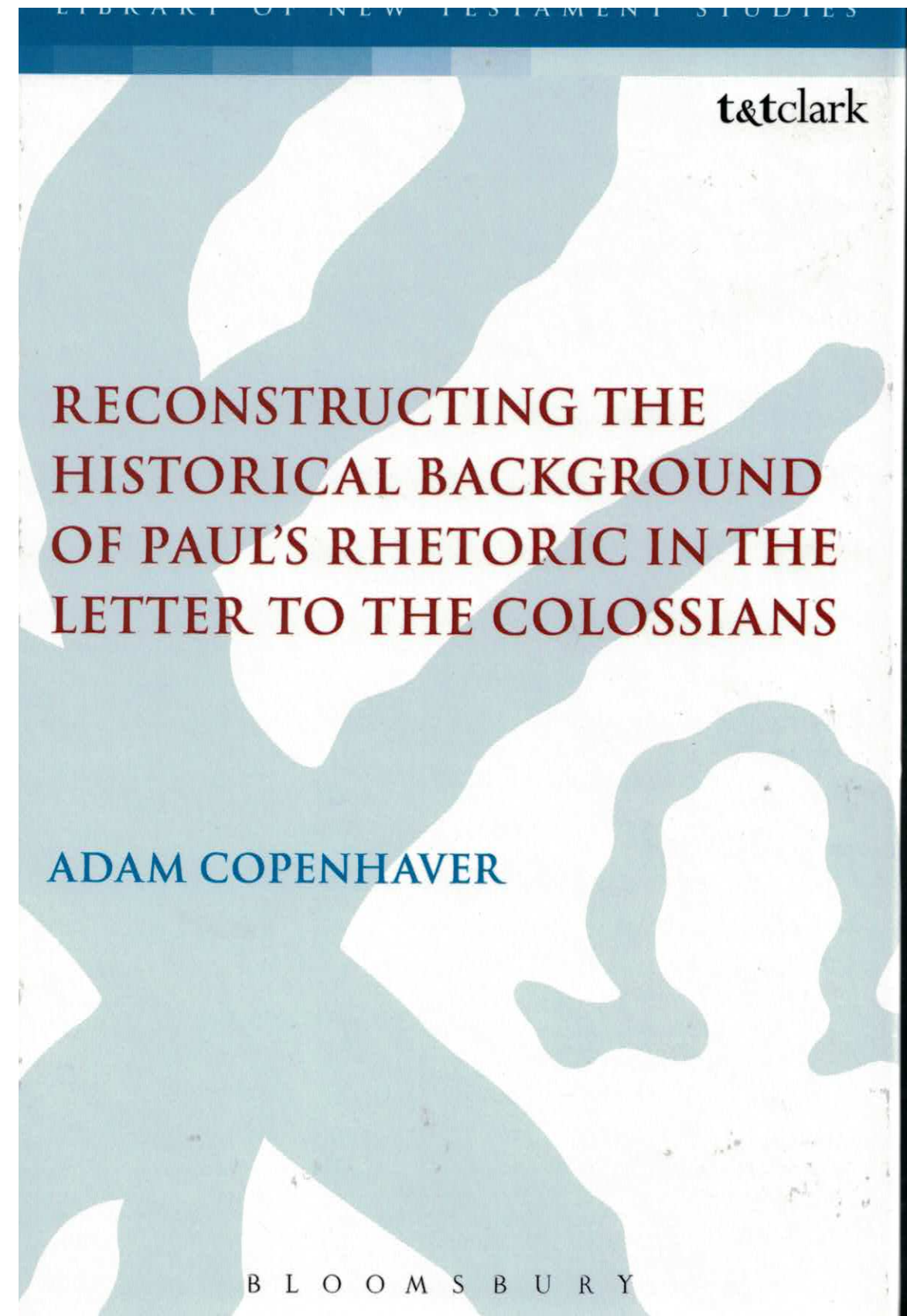
Here Paul lays out the core first principles (authoritative tradition, philosophy, and teaching of Christ

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters



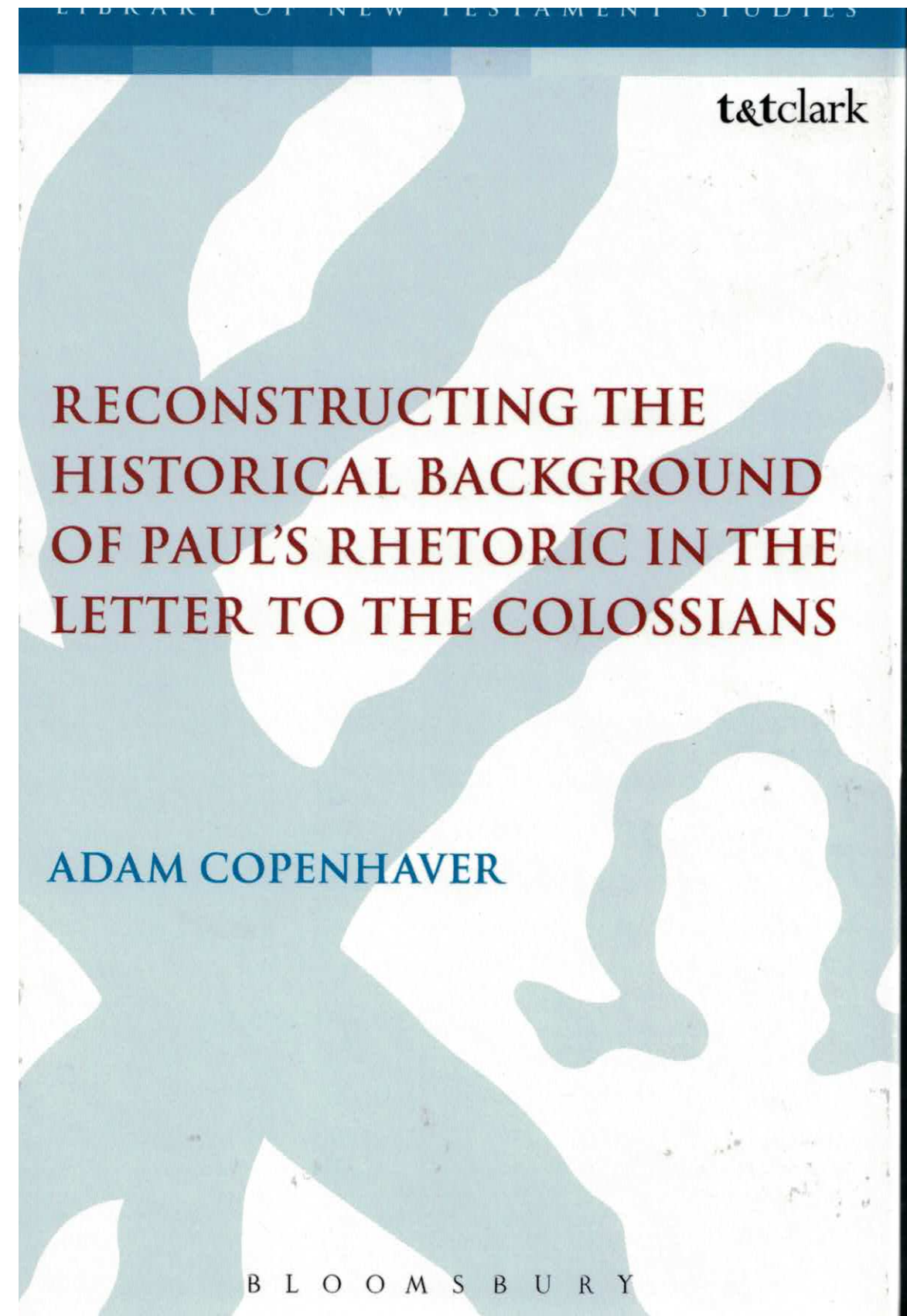
Adam Copenhaver summarizes this well in *Reconstructing the Historical Background of Paul's Rhetoric in the Letter to the Colossians* (T&T Clark, 2018).

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters



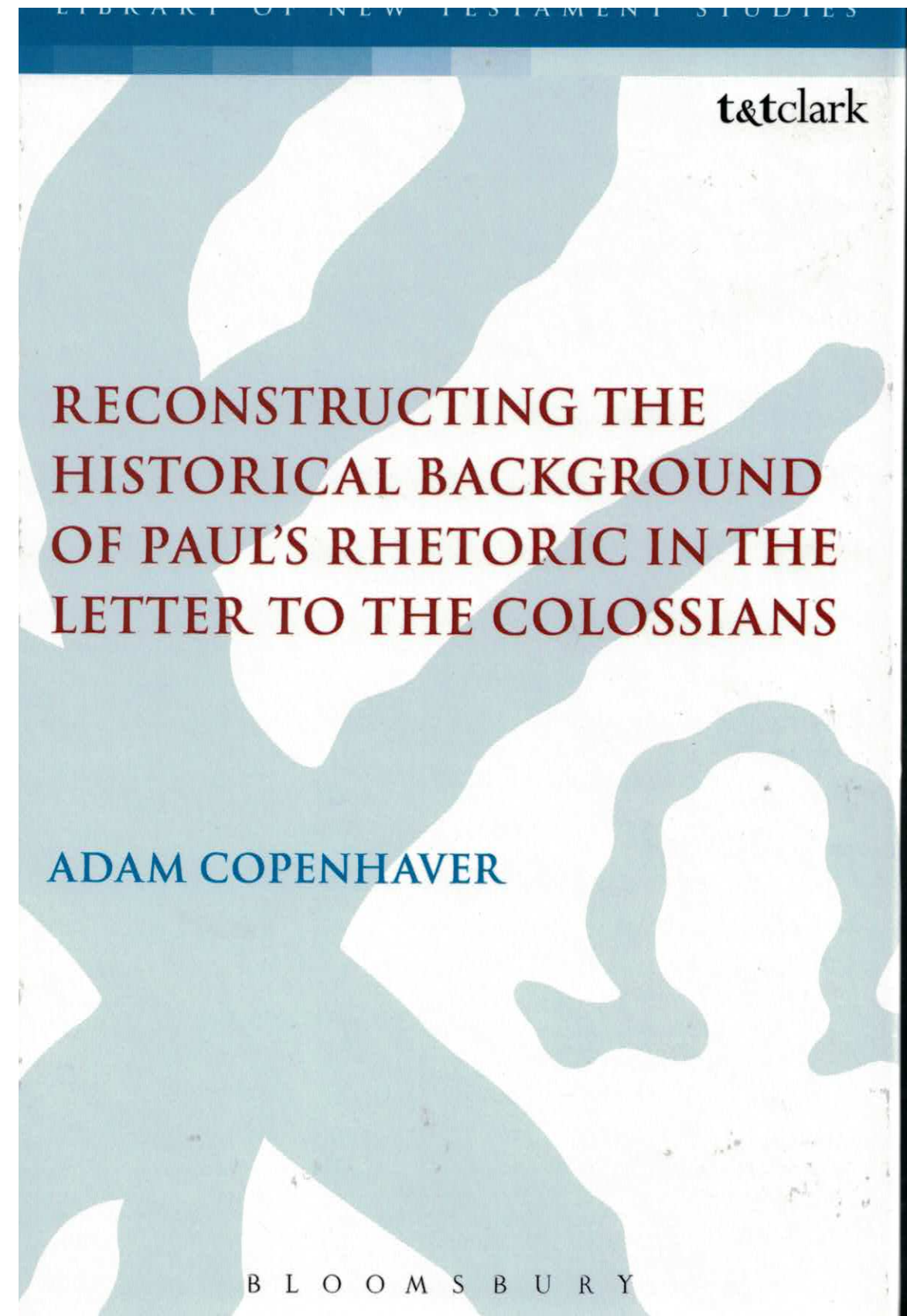
“In this reconstruction, Paul perceives the church at Colossae as a new gathering of people who have received the gospel message from Epaphras, have placed their faith in Christ, have experienced new life in Christ by union with him in his death, burial, and resurrection, and now share a common identity as the body of Christ. This has brought together a variety of people who formerly lived in the world in accordance to its lifestyle, behaviors, and social structures. These people are scattered in house churches throughout the Lycus Valley, remote from one another and living on the furthest margins of Paul’s mission.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters



“And so Paul seeks to strengthen and unify them by giving them an identity as a people and by appealing to them to live in a new manner in accordance with Christ. Their ongoing struggle to hold together as a body and to exchange the lifestyle of the world for the lifestyle of Christ creates the exigence that prompted the letter. The situation Paul entextualizes, therefore, does not constitute an established social group with defined boundaries that is now threatened by a competing group (whether from inside or outside); rather, Paul envisions a group of individuals brought together by their common identity in Christ, yet held together precariously by fine threads and threatening to collapse back into the world out of which they have come.”
p. 235

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters



“In conclusion, there were no opponents in Colossae, at least not in the sense of an active and clearly defined group. But Paul writes out of an awareness of opposition, as people transition out of the world and into the body. These people were real people, having lived within the world and engaged the practices of Judaism and pagan religions. But when they heard and received the gospel from Epaphras, they were brought out of the world and into a body that is defined entirely by Christ. Therefore, Paul writes this letter to explain their identify as a body in Christ and to make a broad appeal for them to put off their former practices, both Jewish and pagan, and to resist such influences as they become a unified body living their new life in Christ within the Lycus Valley.” p. 237

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

So what is Paul saying to the Colossians?

1. You are now part of Christ's kingdom and part of His body, the church, of which He is the head.
2. You need to become fully established in His grand strategy—His philosophy, His teaching, and you need to fully embrace His “first principles,” not the “first principles” of the world, from which you came.
3. You are now part of my commission and my network for carrying this out in our generation.
4. You are a key cluster in this network and need to become a strong, unified network cluster—Colossae, Laodicea, and Hieropolis.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's go back and quickly look at these global contemporary models on the scene today:

- The Seeker Friendly Church—only “soft gospel” focused
- Purpose Driven Church—evangelical, shallow training
- Gospel Community Church—Acts 29 type young postmodern churches—complete confusion on Christ's grand strategy, the Gospels
- The Healthy Church (usually about 8 characteristics)—totally pragmatic
- The Simple Church model—not even churches, just fishing with son on Sunday
- The House church model—complex apostolic network missing

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Let's go back and quickly look at these global contemporary models on the scene today

- Saturation Church Planting/CPM/DMM model—Finish the Task; only churches' purpose is evangelism so Christ can return
- The Cell Church model—misses whole social structure of household; cell is just a metaphor, breaks up families
- The Organic Church model—church social structure not plants and flowers

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

We should not be looking for a model, but Christ's grand strategy of the Church and the churches.

- We are now part of Christ's kingdom and part of His body, the Church, of which He is the head.
- We need to become fully established in His grand strategy—His philosophy, His teaching—and need to fully embrace His “first principles,” not the “first principles’ of the world from which we came.
- We are now part of Christ's commission and network for carrying this out in our generation.
- We are to develop complex apostolic networks today in “the way of Christ and His Apostles.”

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

Issue: Significance of Colossians for us today

Questions:

1. Why is Paul's letter significant for our churches today—both in the West and in the Global South?
2. How does it provide the core of our cultural models?
3. What is likely to happen if we ignore some of these core elements in building our contemporary cultural models?
4. How does our own model line up with these core instructions? Are there missing elements in our model?