

CHRISTIANITY IN EASTERN ASIA MINOR

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During the age of the Roman Empire, the geographic area of present day western Turkey, the region known today as Anatolia, was the Roman province of Asia (or Asiana). The cities of Ephesus, Pergamum, and Smyrna were chief cities in Asia in Roman times. Christianity arrived in Asia when the Apostle Paul began his Third Missionary journey in Ephesus, starting with the baptism of about 12 men (Acts 19:1-7). Paul preached in the synagogue in Ephesus for three months (Acts 19:8). After this, for about two years, Paul taught daily in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10). Paul spent a total of three years in Asia on that missionary journey (Acts 20:31). The result of Paul's work was that *"all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks"* (Acts 19:10). Faithful men who were taught by Paul in Ephesus carried the gospel of Christ throughout Asia, establishing the Lord's church in many cities. Among these Asian cities where the church of Christ was established during those days were three Phrygian cities in Asia about 100 miles east of Ephesus, the cities of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

Epaphras and his work in his native country

At the time of the writing of the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul had not yet seen the faces of his brethren at the eastern end of Asia: *"For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh"* (Col 2:1). At that point, Paul had only heard of their faith in Christ and their love for all the saints (Col 1:4; Phm 5). Epaphras was the one who had told Paul about the Colossian brethren (Col 1:7-9). Epaphras was a native of Colossae (Col 4:12). The Colossians had their faith in Christ and love for the saints because of their hope of heaven (Col 1:4-5), which came by hearing *"the word of the truth of the gospel"* (Col 1:5). That word had come to them and brought forth fruit since the day they had heard it and *"knew the grace of God in truth"* (Col 1:6). Paul says that Epaphras was the one who had taught the Colossians these things (Col 1:7). Paul described Epaphras as a *"dear fellowservant"* who was *"a faithful minister of*

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(continued)

Christ” to the Colossians (Col 1:7). He was “a servant of Christ” (Col 4:12) who had a great zeal for the brethren of his native Colossae, and for Laodicea and Hierapolis which were only a few miles away (Col 4:13). Thus, it appears that Epaphras was the one who had actually carried the truth back to his native area and spread the gospel and started the work in Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis.

The work of Paul and many others

Though we do not know for certain how Epaphras learned the truth himself, it is quite likely that he had been taught and converted by Paul. As his presence in Rome with Paul attests (Col 1:7-9; 4:12-13; Phm 23), Epaphras did know Paul personally and became one of his co-workers. Epaphras probably heard the word in Ephesus from Paul (or at least from someone else who had heard it from Paul in Ephesus), and then carried that word back to his native area and started the churches there. There is no telling how many others did the same thing across Asia, but we do know that everyone in that province came to hear God’s word through Paul’s work in Ephesus, particularly in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10). At the time Colossians and Philemon were written, the church there would have been somewhere around five to eight years old. Now that Epaphras was away from the area and serving Paul in Rome, Archippus, another member of Philemon’s household (Phm 1-2), was evidently the one given the responsibility for carrying on the work there (Col 4:17). Paul converted Onesimus, Philemon’s slave, in Rome and sent him back to Colossae to be with his master and to help the work there (Col 4:9; Phm 10-19). In the closing years of the First Century A.D., 35 to 40 years after Paul’s initial work in Asia, Christianity had a strong foothold there. Seven churches in Asia received letters from Christ in Revelation chapters two and three. Ephesus, where Paul’s work started in Asia, received one of these letters. One of the Phrygian cities of eastern Asia, Laodicea, also received one of these letters. This is a testimony of the enduring work of Paul, Epaphras, and many other faithful Christians, which brought much glory to the Lord.