

COLOSSIAN – INTRODUCTION Part 2

Review

- Location – Asia Minor – Main E/W trade route – with Laodicea & Hierapolis
- Church – started by Epaphras – heard Gospel fm Paul while at Ephesus
- Key People – met in Philemon’s House, leader Archippus, letter carried by Tychius & Onesimus
- Members – mainly Gentile converts from paganism
- Purpose of letter – Epaphras brought news to Paul – Roman imprisonment
 - Good & bad report - facing two dangers
 - Falling back into immorality of pagan roots
 - Accepting false teaching – “The Colossian Heresy”
- Heresy – Attacked the Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ to completely save and sanctify them
 - Christ plus....was needed to know God completely, to be completely saved and to be completely sanctified (have victory over sinful nature)
 - Christ our all sufficient Prophet, Priest and King – attacked by this heresy
 - Key verses – 2:9-10

Christ our Prophet

- WLC Q 43 – Christ is the source of all knowledge, wisdom and truth. We only need to look to him to know God fully and to know his will.

Question 43: How does Christ execute the office of a prophet?

Answer: Christ executes the office of a prophet, in his revealing to the church, in all ages, by his Spirit and Word, in divers ways of administration, the whole will of God, in all things concerning their edification and salvation

- Colossian Heresy - the worldly philosophy that they were encountering with all of its persuasive arguments and empty deception was teaching them that more was needed to know all the truth and know God fully.
 - Since Christ was not supreme or completely sufficient, he could not provide the complete knowledge of God. They had to look elsewhere.
 - 2:18 – they needed to go through angels and have visions
 - It seems there was certain pride associated with obtaining the hidden knowledge of mysteries (2:18) – kind of a spiritual elite who had a higher knowledge than the rest
- So Paul spends a lot of time emphasizing that God reveals all mysteries and knowledge and wisdom in the person of Jesus Christ. He is The Prophet who we should listen to and look to – the source of all wisdom and knowledge.
 - 1:9-10 Paul’s prays for their increase in knowledge and wisdom
 - 1:25-28 The preaching of the Word is what reveals God’s mystery
 - 2:2-3 The mystery of God is in fact Christ himself
In Christ, himself, is all wisdom and knowledge -They need not look anywhere else

- Mystical characteristic in the Colossian heresy – a belief in the need to seek for a higher knowledge of God than was readily available through Christ - through mystical means.

Christ our Priest

- WLC Q 44 – Christ’s sacrifice of himself makes us completely reconciled to God.

Question 44: How does Christ execute the office of a priest?

Answer: Christ executes the office of a priest, in his once offering himself a sacrifice without spot to God, to be a reconciliation for the sins of his people; and in making continual intercession for them.

- The OT ceremonial laws and regulations were shadows and types of Christ and his finished work on the cross (2:16-17)
- Christ came & offered himself once for our sins perfectly – it’s done
- The worldly philosophy they were encountering was teaching them to continue depending upon these shadows and types to make them right with God.
 - 2:16-17 Paul’s warns them to not be pressured by those who were still pushing these OT regulations that had been fulfilled in Christ.
 - 2:11-13 Paul’s shows them not to depend upon outward circumcision but the inward circumcision which the OT ritual pointed to.
- Ritualistic or legalistic characteristic in the Colossian heresy – a belief that Christ plus the performance of rituals was necessary to make one completely right with God.

Christ our King

- WLC Q 45 – Christ has the power to completely rule over our souls and to sanctify us. It is through his internal work in our hearts that we gain victory over our sinful nature with its fleshly desires and passions.

Question 45: How does Christ execute the office of a king?

Answer: Christ executes the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them; in bestowing saving grace upon his elect, rewarding their obedience, and correcting them for their sins, preserving and supporting them under all their temptations and sufferings, restraining and overcoming all their enemies, and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good; and also in taking vengeance on the rest, who know not God, and obey not the gospel.

- The worldly philosophy they were encountering was teaching them that something more than Christ was necessary to do this.

- 2:20-23 Paul's warns them that submitting themselves to extra stringent outward regulations (Pharisees) and depriving their bodies in an ascetic manner (Monks) was not the way to control the desires of the flesh.
 - 2:11 Paul says the real way to removal the power of the flesh is by the inward circumcision of the heart
 - 3:1-2 Paul says the answer the power to overcome sin comes from our union with Christ in his death & resurrection.
 - The rest of the letter shows what new life in Christ empowered by the resurrection power of Christ look like – the sanctified life – the new life in Christ
- Ascetic characteristic in the Colossian heresy – a belief in the need control the sinful flesh from the outside in with self-imposed rigorous restrictions.

Where did these false teachings come from?

Colossae was on the main highway connecting the east with the west. It is easy to see how different philosophies could be introduced to them.

Religions of all kinds could be found in the Roman Empire of the first century.

- The environment at Colossae - religious pluralism.
- Coexisted with people who worshipped Anatolian, Persian, Greek, Roman, and Egyptian deities and with Jews who were devoted to the worship of one god and the observance of Torah.
- The dominant religious attitude was **Syncretism**, the selecting and blending of religious ideas into new forms according to one's wishes.
- The Colossian Heresy was Jewish at the root - but went beyond Judaism, being mixed with other extra biblical ideas.
- Possible sources Incipient Gnosticism, the Jewish sects of the Essenes, Dionysus, or a more radical philosophy in Judaism called Merkabah Mysticism.
- All of these are a syncretism of religious ideas, all with a strong mysticism nature
- How any of these would have been introduced in the Asia Minor region is not known.
- It is not clear if any of these are in fact the heresy that the Colossian were being threaten by – it is possible that some Jews from one of these sects traveled to Asia Minor and were converted to Christianity but maintain some of the ideas.
- All authors felt it was helpful to look at them to shed some light the Colossian heresy

Possible sources of the Colossian heresy

1. Incipient Gnosticism

- For a long time, scholars assumed that the Colossian error was some form of Gnosticism.
- Today, that idea has been discounted, because it has become clear that fully developed Gnosticism did not come into being until the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

- However there are some similarities – maybe a pre-cursor to Gnosticism before it became fully developed later on – Incipient Gnosticism
- Combine Oriental, Greek, and Christian ideas
- Greek “gnosis” – one who knows, or someone in the know
- Essence of Gnosticism – pursuit of secret knowledge only revealed to the elite – those who took the initiative
 - Only the “spirit” was good, physical matter was evil
 - Therefore God could not be directly connected with this physical world nor have directly created it.
- Consequently, there were many different levels or emanations or realms between this physical world and God. Christ was somewhere in between.
- The Gnostic hoped to escape this “bad” world and the “prison” of their fleshly bodies through obtaining a higher knowledge by mystically climbing up the various realms toward the heavenly and divine.
- These groups often claimed Jesus as the true Teacher of Gnosticism. They distinguished between his public teaching followed by ordinary Christians, and the deeper “secret teaching” revealed only to his disciples, now passed down to the Gnostics.
- This low view of the physical body sometimes lead to rigid ascetic treatment of it (it is evil). In other instances it led to the wildest license (because it didn't matter – only the spirit did).

There are similarities – but pure Gnosticism didn't involve angels or observance of the Mosaic Law. These incipient Gnostic ideas might have had some influence. But most believe the heresy to be a Jewish heresy.

Yet the straightforward Judaizing legalism of Galatians was not what was going on at Colossae. Instead it added a form of mysticism which tempted its followers to look on themselves as spiritual elite. Certain movements within Judaism cultivated this idea of higher knowledge.

2. Jewish Dionysius

Calvin identified the false teachers as Jews — but Jews of a speculative tendency, who "invented an access to God through the angels, and put forth many speculations of that nature, such as are contained in the books of Dionysius on the *Celestial Hierarchy*, drawn from the school of the Platonists." Dionysius' "celestial hierarchy" comprised nine orders of angels, by whose mediation God ordained that human beings should be raised to closer communion with Himself.

3. Jewish Essenes

Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes – three main sects in Judaism

A more popular body of Jews which laid claim to higher knowledge and special revelation was the Essene order. They strictly followed the Mosaic Law and added rigid

asceticism. They were fond of mystic speculations and did hold to an esoteric doctrine of angels. Some of this group forbade marriage. They lived in communities together dedicated to asceticism, voluntary poverty, daily immersion, and abstinence from worldly pleasures. It is believed the Qumran who lived where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found were part of this order.

4. Jewish Merkabah Mysticism

“Merkabah” is the Hebrew word for God’s throne. Merkabah mysticism was a movement where people tried to attain the kind of spiritual vision of God on his throne that was seen by the prophets Isaiah (see Isaiah 6:1-8) and Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 1). They blended those visions from the Hebrew Scriptures and added Gnostic-like concepts of heavenly spheres, each guarded by an angel.

The merkabah mystic believed one had to prepare oneself for this ascent by rigorous fasting and other ascetic practices for many days. Then he had to rise through a hazardous spiritual journey, where he could only gain passage by giving the angels the appropriate passwords (the content of the “knowledge”). Eventually he hoped to make his way to the highest sphere and see God on his throne. The typical term these mystics used for the total system of heavenly spheres was *pleroma*, the Greek word translated “fullness.”

Scholar F. F. Bruce comments on this cult:

It cannot be proved that the Colossian heresy involved an early form of merkabah mysticism, but the heavenly ascent implied in Col. 2:18 appears to have been of the same character as the experience which the merkabah mystics sought. The Colossian heresy evidently encouraged the claim that the fullness of God could be appreciated only by mystical experiences for which ascetic preparation was necessary.

It can not be proven that any of these were the exact false teaching that the Colossians were facing.

- From reading Colossians it is apparent that Christianity was being mixed to some degree with something like these that resulted in a philosophy that Christ plus something else was needed.
- All of these attack the sufficiency of Christ who is supreme over all for our salvation and sanctification.
- Every feature of this ancient heresy has risen its head at various times throughout the history of the Church and even today in our time.
 - Mysticism, ritualism, legalism, and asceticism can be found to some degree everywhere in the visible church today.
 - And there is always the temptation for Christians to fall into gross immorality - or to look to one of these errors to fight the temptation to do so.
- Therefore the principles that Paul taught and urged upon the Colossian believers readily apply to us today.

Colossians - Outline

- I. The Preface Ch. 1:1-12**
 - A. Salutation 1:1-2
 - B. Paul's Thanksgiving 1:3-8
 - C. Paul's Prayer for Growth and Maturity 1:9-12

- II. The Preeminence of Christ Ch. 1:13-23**
 - A. His Divine Person 1:13-18
 - B. His Reconciling Work 1: 19-23

- III. The Apostle of Christ Ch. 1:24 to 2:7**
 - A. Paul's Apostolic Ministry in Relation to the Church in General 1:24-29
 - B. Apostolic Ministry in Relation to the Colossian Church Specifically 2:1-7

- IV. The False Philosophy and The Sufficiency of Christ Ch. 2:8-3:4**
 - A. The False Philosophy Exposed 2:8
 - B. The Sufficiency of Christ Expounded 2:9-15
 - B. Specific Errors of the False Philosophy 2:16-23
 - C. The Correct Answer – Union with Christ 3:1-4

- V. The New Life in Christ Ch. 3:5-4:6**
 - A. Put to death / put off the Old Life of Sin 3:5-11
 - B. Put on the New Life in Christ 3:12-17
 - C. The Christian Household 3:18-21
 - D. The Christian Master & Servant (Boss & Employee) 3:22-4:1
 - E. The Life of Prayer 4:2-4
 - F. The Life of Discretion in Relation to Non-Believers 4:5-6

- VI. The Closing Statements Ch. 4:7-18**
 - A. The Companions of The Apostle 4:7-17
 - B. The Final Greeting of The Apostle 4:18