

We know little about the town of Colossae in Asia Minor except that it was about 100 miles east of Ephesus where Paul spent about three years on his third missionary journey. Apparently, Paul had never been to Colossae, but many of his disciples had. One of those disciples was Epaphras who is mentioned in Paul's letter to Philemon as being a prisoner with Paul in Rome. It is likely that Epaphras began the church in Colossae, and kept in close contact with his mentor Paul. Paul said in Colossians 1:7 that they learned the gospel from Epaphras. In Colossians 4:12 we learn that Epaphras was a member and a leader of the church in Colossae. Epaphras was no doubt concerned about Paul's circumstances in Rome and the situation in Colossae. False teachers were threatening the Colossian church so Epaphras may have traveled to report to Paul about the Colossian heresy, and then he also was arrested and became a prisoner.

We cannot be certain exactly what the heresy was or who the false teachers were, but we can read between the lines to get an educated guess at their identity and teachings. The heresy contained elements of Greek philosophy, paganism, Jewish legalism, ascetic practices, and the veneration of angels. The main thrust of Paul's letter to the church at Colossae is to counteract the influence of this false doctrine reported by Epaphras. Paul called the problem a "philosophy" in Col.2:8. The Greeks loved philosophy and prided themselves in developing philosophic systems and persuasive arguments to support them. The nature of Christ appears to be at the center of the heresy. Paul indicates that these philosophers denied both the full humanity of Christ and the deity of Christ. Since all matter was evil in Greek thought, God could never become human. They were advocating that Christ was some kind of spirit being that the Gnostics would later develop and refer to as an "emanation". They also denied the sufficiency of Christ for salvation and spiritual life, which Paul well refuted in passages like Col.2, "in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden...All the fullness of deity dwells in Christ in bodily form...in Him you have been made complete".

Colossians 2 also reveals the following about the Colossian heresy: They ordered them to submit to holy days like the Sabbath along with food restrictions. They issue many prohibitions common to the Jewish legalistic traditions such as do not touch, taste, or handle. Asceticism and self abasement are expected. The veneration of angels and the testimony of visions is a part of this teaching. The false teaching has the appearance of the wisdom of men and its in persuasive confident arguments. To sum up the Colossian heresy, it contained two basic systems of thought—Greek philosophy and Judaistic legalism. They advocate circumcision, rigid self denial, adherence to laws, dietary restrictions, holy days, and the proponents speak worship of angels. Paul dismisses these arguments as human commands

and teachings which do not measure up to divine revelation. Paul will refute all their teaching by proving that Christ alone is sufficient for their salvation. The theme of the book of Colossians can be summed up by Colossians 3:11, "Christ is all and in all". Christ is God, Creator, Savior, and Head of the church. It seems likely that these opponents were Hellenistic Jews.

Who Were Those Guys ?

The historian Josephus recorded in his writings that between 223-187 BC, Antiochus III transported a large Jewish population from Mesopotamia to the area of Colossae. These Jews would have been speaking Greek and would have been influenced by Greek culture and philosophy by the first century when Paul wrote. The mention of circumcision, Sabbaths, and food laws are distinctive Jewish identity markers. Jews believed the law was delivered by angels, thus Jews had a great interest in angels. Like all the other first century churches in Asia Minor, there was a number of Jews in Colossae who were converted to Christianity, and this would have been a source of concern for the Jewish community. Therefore, I believe the false teachers that Paul was refuting were Hellenistic Jews who took exception to these Gentiles who were pirating their countrymen and their Scriptures.

Paul's Argument

Paul's way of refuting the Colossian heresy will be to accurately reveal the true nature of Jesus Christ. In Col.1:15-19, he presents Jesus as the exact essence of God, the Creator of the universe, the Creator of angels, and the head of the church. God created man in His image, but that means we have intellect, will, communication skills, and we have an eternal spirit. But Christ is the image of God in the sense He possesses the same attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and eternity—He is not a created being. Jesus pre-existed the incarnation, and was always in heaven. One theologian said that, "Jesus reflects God's attributes as the sun's light reflects the sun." Hebrews 1:3 tells us that "Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's nature". In John 14, the disciples were saying to Jesus, "Show us the Father", but Jesus replied "He who has seen Me has seen the Father". In Col.1:15, when Paul says Jesus is the "first born", he does not mean Jesus is created. He means Jesus is the first in position, rank, or inheritance. Jesus is preeminent. Jesus is preeminent over all creation because "by Him all things were created". Jesus not only created all things, He sustains them, or as Paul wrote, "in Him all things hold together." Col.1:16 reveals also that the very angels that these opponents worshipped were created by Jesus. What is Christ's relationship to the church? Christ is the head of the church, He not only formed it but He energizes it and gives the diversity of gifts that serve and support the

church. It is only through the work of Christ that the members of the church are reconciled to God as Paul puts it, "having made peace through the blood of the cross...although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind...yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death".(Col.1:20-22) Jesus took on the flesh in order to suffer and die on the cross for our sins so that we could be reconciled to God and be forgiven. Before Christ, people were living in rebellion and fell short of God's required standard, therefore they were alienated from God, but the atoning work of Christ on the cross has brought us near to God.

Christ Exalted Over All Things

Colossians chapter two makes it clear that Jesus is exalted over all the things that the false teachers are promoting. Jesus is exalted over all the philosophies of men. Most men have always pondered the ultimate questions of creation and the meaning of our existence. Philosophy comes from two Greek words, phileo (love), and sophia (wisdom), therefore it is the love of wisdom of men. When I studied philosophy I noticed that all the great thinkers acknowledged that mankind has a serious problem; where they differed was the meaning, purpose, and solution. I always wondered how these so called "great thinkers" could all disagree yet all be brilliant. The fact is that apart from God, no one is considered brilliant by God. Paul said it well in Romans 1:22, "Professing to be wise, they became fools". I like what Francis Schaeffer wrote, "man cannot begin with himself and arrive at ultimate reality". Paul wisely wrote to the Colossians to make sure that none of these philosophers took them "captive through philosophy and empty deception". These philosophies were of the world, but Christ is from Heaven, and the gospel is to be exalted above the philosophy of men. In Jesus "all the fullness of Deity exists...and in Him you have been made complete"(Col.2:8-10).

People have always devised religions based on obedience to rituals, laws, and doing good works. Paul established in Colossians 2:11-17 that a belief in and a relationship with Jesus is also superior to those religious practices like circumcision, kosher eating, or Sabbath observances. In Jesus you have a spiritual circumcision of the heart far superior to a physical one. The law consists of "decrees that are against us and which were hostile to us"(2:14) in the sense that we cannot keep God's standard without God's help so we are found guilty of sin, but Christ has taken away that guilt having nailed it to the cross.

Paul also makes it clear that the worship of angels is not a part of God's plan in Col.2:18, nor is forming doctrine based on supposed visions "inflated w/o cause by his fleshly mind". I wonder what Paul would say about these goofballs on TV?

Another popular religious practice that was being promoted in Colossae was asceticism or

self abasement. People actually feel like if they will severely punish their body it will somehow atone for their sin. The image that sticks with me is those guys that walk along with a whip flogging their own back with every step.

Since we have the Savior that God has provided that is better than all these things, we should be motivated to keep seeking the spiritual things, setting our minds on the things above. Seek Him where He has revealed Himself in His Scriptures. We have died to all that stuff that the false teachers were promoting, and we now live for Christ alone. We look forward to the full realization and experience of being “in Christ” when Christ comes back, and we also will be revealed with Him in glory.

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