**The Gospel in heathen and multi-religious life:**

**A study of the letter to the Colossians**

**The Colossian Church and the Purpose of the Letter**

The cosmopolitan city of Colossae (with Phrygian, Greek, Jewish, etc. citizenry) lay about 100 miles inland (east) from the port of Ephesus. Though once a large and prosperous city, changes in road structure led to its decline until the time of Paul when it was only a “small town.” Again, it is situated about 10 miles from Laodicea and 13 miles from Hierapolis on the Lycus River (cf. 2:1; 4:13).

The church in Colossae was probably founded by a Colossian, namely, Epaphras (1:7; 4:12) who himself was, at least for a little while, a prisoner with Paul in Rome (Phmn 23). Epaphras had apparently traveled to Rome to inform Paul of the state of the church in Colossae, especially in light of the heresy developing within it (1:8).

The heresy in Colossae is not given a full description in the letter making it difficult to be certain of all its tenets and the precise emphasis given to its different aspects. For this and other reasons some scholars have contended that there is no *one particular and identifiable* heresy in Colossae.

According to these scholars all that Paul was combating, for example, were superstitious, ascetic, and legalistic tendencies within the church. But there are enough distinct features of the heretical movement to indicate that it was identifiable as such by the apostle and addressed as a *“hollow and deceptive philosophy”* (2:8). We may assume, therefore, that it possessed definable features and a distinguishable—however much in its infancy—intellectual outline.

But what are some of the features of this false and obviously syncretistic *(blending of differing faiths)* philosophy? First, there is a Jewish element, but not of the sort that Paul faced in the Galatian churches (cf. Galatians and Acts 15). Here we see food and drink laws, as well as the observance of festivals and new moon Sabbaths (2:16-17). Second, there is probably a pagan element indicated by the worship of angels (assuming that 2:18 is a purely descriptive statement) and the demand for rigorous asceticism (2:18-19). This latter element is probably related to what later developed into full blown Gnosticism (2nd century).

Gnostic thought is characterized by several tenets, some of the more important being:

(1) the idea that matter is evil;

(2) there is a gradation of beings emanating from the one pure and unknowable God (Plotinus?), and

(3) salvation comes through knowledge and initiates a person into an elite group. The particular twist on these ideas in Colossians may have involved the notion that angels and principalities played a significant role in the giving of the Law and therefore regulated communication to and from God. The result was that they needed to be placated by strict legal observances.

In response to these false notions Paul does the following:

(1) he warns the Colossians not to be taken captive, i.e., kidnapped by such philosophy (2:8);

(2) he exposes the transience, empty deceit, and arrogance of the philosophy (2:4, 8, 18, 22-23);

(3) he presents the superiority of Christ, that is, his person, his saving work, and his complete sovereignty over the “emanations” (i.e., the so-called principalities and powers).

It is through the death and resurrection of Christ—who is the “final reality” to which the OT points (2:16-17), the sole mediator between God and man, and the One in whom all the fullness of the deity dwells bodily (a notion repugnant to the Colossian errorists)—that we, by faith, are joined to all the fullness of God and his blessing (2:9-10). Christ is not *primus inter pares* (“First among equals”); it is through Him *alone* that we:

(1) overcome indwelling sin (2:11-13; 3:1-4:6),

(2) are released from the condemnation of the law (2:14),

(3) gain victory over the power of demonic forces (2:15) and

(4) come to realize the bankruptcy of mere religious hype.

Further, this is a message rooted in spiritual joy and is available to every man; there is no stoicism, mere asceticism, legalism, or libertinism in the Pauline conception of Christ’s ongoing work in his church (1:23). *“If you have Christ, you have everything”* is Paul’s response. *“Don’t add anything else,”* the apostle warns, *“lest you distort, diminish, or denigrate the superiority of Christ, his gospel, or the Christian life.”*

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**Colossians - Teaching Outline**

I. Introduction, Thanksgiving and Prayers

 A. Introduction (1:1-2)

 B. Salutation (1:1-2)

 1. The Senders (1:1)

 2. The Recipients (1:2a)

 3. The Greeting (1:2b)

 C. Paul’s Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Colossians (1:3-14)

 1. Paul’s Thanksgiving for the Colossians (1:3-8)

 2. The Thanksgiving Proper (1:3)

 3. The Reason: The Colossian’s Reception of the Gospel (1:4-6)

 a. Characterized by Faith that Springs from Hope (1:4a)

 b. Characterized by Love that Springs from Hope (1:4b-5)

 D. Summary: The Increasing Influence of the Gospel (1:6)

 1. In the Entire World (1:6a)

 2. Among the Colossians (1:6b-8)

 3. They Understood the Grace of God in All It’s Truth (1:6b)

 4. Epaphras Taught Them the Truth (1:7)

 5. Epaphras Told Paul about the Colossians (1:8)

 E. Paul’s Prayer for the Colossians (1:9-14)

 1. The Prayer Itself: Spiritual Wisdom and Understanding (1:9)

 a. Goal of the Prayer: Live Life Worthy of the Lord (1:10-12)

 b. Bearing Fruit in Every Good Work (1:10a)

 c. Growing in the Knowledge of the Lord (1:10b)

 d. Being Strengthened with All Power (1:11)

 e. Joyfully Giving Thanks (1:12)

 2. Foundation of the Prayer: The Salvific Work of God (1:13-14)

 a. Rescue us from the Dominion of Darkness (1:13a)

 b. Bring us into Kingdom of His Son: Redemption (1:13b-14)

II. The Supremacy of Christ (1:15-2:23)

 A. The Supremacy of Christ Over All Things (1:15-20)

 1. He Is God (1:15a)

 2. He Is The Heir (1:15b)

 3. He Is The Creator (1:16)

 4. He Is The Sustainer (1:17)

 5. He Is The Head of the Church (1:18a)

 6. He Is The Firstborn from among the Dead (1:18b)

 7. He Is Supreme in All Things (1:18c)

 8. He Is The Divine-Human Redeemer (1:19-20)

 a. The Divine Fullness Dwells in Him (1:19)

 b. He Redeemed All Things through the Cross (1:20)

 B. The Supremacy of Christ’s Gospel: A Reminder (1:21-23)

 1. We Were Separated and Enemies of God (1:21)

 2. We Have Now Been Reconciled through the Gospel (1:22)

 a. The Means of Reconciliation (1:22a)

 b. The Goal of Reconciliation (1:22b)

 c. The Condition of Reconciliation (1:23a)

 d. The Universal Offer of Reconciliation (1:23b)

 C. The Supremacy of Serving Christ (1:24-2:5)

 1. Paul’s Privilege in Ministry (1:24-27)

 a. To Suffer for Christ (1:24)

 b. To Present the Word of God in Its Fullness (1:25-27)

 i. It Was His Commissioning (1:25)

 c. To Present Divine Revelation to Gentile Saints (1:26-27)

 i. Truth Not Previously Revealed (1:26)

 ii. Truth about the Mystery: “Christ in You” (1:27)

 2. Paul’s *Ultimate* Goal and Strength for Ministry (1:28-29)

 a. The Goal: To Present Everyone Perfect in Christ (1:28)

 b. The Strength: All “His” Energy (1:29)

 3. Paul’s *Immediate* Goal in His Colossian Ministry (2:1-5)

 a. To Promote Unity and Encouragement (2:1-2a)

 b. To Prevent Delusion (2:2b-5)

 D. The Supremacy of Christ Over Empty Traditions (2:6-23)

 1. The Command To Walk in Christ (2:6-7)

 a. The Context: Having Received Christ as Lord (2:6a)

 b. The Command: Walk in Him (2:6b-7)

 E. The Supremacy of Christ’s Salvation over Empty Philosophy:

 A. Warning (2:8-15)

 1. Philosophy Not according to Christ (1:8)

 2. Salvation according to Christ (1:9-15)

 3. General Statement: Incarnation, Completeness, Authority (1:9)

 4. Specific Statement: Circumcision and Baptism (1:10-15)

 a. The Analogy of Circumcision (1:10)

 b. The Analogy of Baptism (1:11-14)

 c. The Triumph over Enemies (1:15)

 F. The Supremacy of Christian Spirituality: A Challenge (2:16-19)

 G. The Supremacy of Christ over Man-Made Religion:

 Inconsistency (2:20-23)

III. The Supremacy of Christ-Centered Living (3:1-4:6)

 A. It’s Focus and Nature (3:1-17)

 1. It Begins with a Focus on Christ (3:1-5)

 2. It Involves Taking Off The Old Man (3:6-11)

 3. It Involves Putting on the New Man (3:12-17)

 B. It’s Affect on Every Relationship (3:18-4:6)

 1. The Marriage Relationship (3:18-19)

 a. The Command to Wives (3:18)

 b. The Command to Husbands (3:19)

 2. The Family Relationship (3:20-21)

 a. The Command to Children (3:20)

 b. The Command to Fathers (3:21)

 3. The Slave-Master Relationship (3:22)

 a. Admonition to Slaves (3:22-25)

 i. The Command (3:22-23)

 ii. The Rationale with the Command (3:24)

 iii. The Warning with the Command (3:25)

 b. Admonition to Masters (4:1)

 C. It’s Evangelistic Nature (4:2-6)

 1. Praying for the Advance of the Gospel (4:2-4)

 2. Living Wisely Before Non-Christians (4:5-6)

IV. Paul’s Plans and Final Greetings (4:7-18)

 A. Paul’s Plans: Tychicus and Onesimus to Come (4:7-9)

 1. The Fact of Their Coming (4:7)

 2. The Reason for Their Coming (4:8-9)

 B. Final Greetings (4:10-18)

 1. Special People (4:10-14)

 a. Aristarchus (4:10a)

 b. Mark, the Cousin of Barnabas (Mark 4:10b)

 c. Jesus, Called Justus (4:11)

 d. Epaphras (4:12-13)

 e. Luke (4:14a)

 f. Demas (4:14b)

 2. Special Greetings (4:15)

 a. The Brothers at Laodicea (4:15a)

 b. To Nympha (4:15b)

 c. To The Church in Nympha’s House (4:15c)

 C. Special Request (4:16)

 a. “Colossians” to be read in Colossae (4:16a)

 b. “Colossians” to be read in the Church of Laodicea (4:16b)

 c. The Church at Colossae to read Laodicean Letter (4:16c)

 D. Special Reminder (4:17)

 E. Special Guarantee (4:18)

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