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The Colossians Heresy

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THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Exegetical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

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June 1956

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the writer is to investigate the background and nature of the Colossian Heresy, and St. Paul's defense of the Pre-eminence of Christ. If one is to be a serious student of the New Testament, he must take into account the history of the New Testament Era. In so doing, he can understand more fully and see more clearly the great workings of the Holy Spirit as He brings the gospel to men.

Gnosticism as a school of thought is dead; however, the influence of its thought lives down to this very day in every creed or formulation which takes the glory of the Godhead from Jesus Christ. The term "gnostic" is used in this thesis to designate the theosophical teaching which was present at Colossae. It is not used in the sense of the great "Gnostic" systems of the first, second, and third centuries.

Paul's concern was that the Colossians see the pre-eminence of Christ in all things. This is evident in the soaring verses of the great Christological section (1:15-20) and in the beautiful practical exhortations of Chapter 3. With his devotion to the proclamation of the utter pre-eminence of Christ, Paul left only meager traces of the false teaching which was being foisted upon the Colossian Christians; therefore, to know the exact nature of the

heresy is difficult.

This thesis covers the main body of the letter to the Colossians. It contains no remarks on the greeting, 1:1-3, or on the highly personalized conclusion in chapter 4. The concern of the writer is with the polemical portions of the Letter. It has been examined under five headings: first, The Congregation is Faithful; second, The Introductory Prayer; third, The Positive Doctrinal Statement; fourth, The Direct Attack on the Errorists; and fifth, The Practical Exhortations.

The city of Colossae was ten to twelve miles east of the cities of Laodicea and Hieropolis. It was some hundred miles from the famous city of Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, where Saint Paul carried on a long and successful mission (Acts 19). The town seemed to be of importance in the ancient world for both Herodotus and Xenophon mention it. It was a rich city as evidenced by the fact that it was able to recover from the great earthquake in the year 62 A.D. without assistance.¹ Traffic in dyed wool formed the basis for commerce. The baths and wines of the region were well known. Lightfoot notes that even the Talmud bitterly recalled the pleasures of this region, "The baths and the wines of Phrygia have separated

¹Y. Godet, *Studies on the Epistles of St. Paul*, translated by Annie Harwood Roladen (London, New York, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton; n.d.), p. 162.

CHAPTER II

THE BACKGROUND OF THE LYCUS CHURCHES

The cities of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were in the Lycus valley, a beautiful mountain region of the country of Phrygia. Mount Cadmus, seven thousand feet high, towered over the area and added to the grandeur of the scene. The valley was known for remarkable incrustations of lime deposited by the Lycus River.

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¹F. Godet, Studies on the Epistles of St. Paul, translated by Annie Harwood Holmden (London, New York, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 162.

the Ten Tribes of Israel."²

Hieropolis, a second city situated in the Lycus valley, also deserves notice. It, too, was prosperous and well-known for its beauty and wealth.³ Apollo was the patron god of the city. A spring found here, which emitted deadly fumes, was the center of a mystical worship for all of Phrygia. This worship was influenced by oriental mores, especially Egyptian.⁴

Strabo bears witness to the fact that Laodicea, the third of the three important cities, was a wealthy cultural center. The worship of the city was directed to Zeus. Occasionally, Zeus is called Aseis, "a title which reproduces a Syrian epithet of this deity, 'the mighty.'"⁵ This is again evidence of the link between the religions of Laodicea and the East, a connection far from improbable, for the city was refounded by a Syrian king and likely to have adopted some features of Syrian worship.

The Phrygian people who populated the valley were well-known for their extraordinary gifts. They were skillful in arts and crafts, the dyeing of woolen stuffs, and in scien-

²J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon (Third edition; London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), p. 20.

³Ibid., p. 12.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 4.

tific pursuits. Arts of medicine and healing were known, and grammarians, sophists, rhetoricians, and religionists were found there.⁶

The region of Phrygia was "particularly favorable soil"⁷ for enthusiastic religions, and always a spawning ground of various cults, wild prophets, and new forms of religion. Syncretistic conditions prevailed making this a region where Judaism, Orientalism, and Hellenism would most easily combine into the heresy opposed by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians. Throughout the known world at this time there was a mingling of elements resulting in a "quiet coalescence of Orientalism with Graeco-Roman thought in various forms of syncretism."⁸ The worship of nature, the great Mother Gaia, the tower-crowned Cybele, and Bacchus were known in this region. Ascetic tendencies were also continually appearing in Asia Minor and the ascetism and speculation of the Colossian heretics (Col. 2:16,18,21,23)

⁶Karl Braune, The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, translated by M. B. Riddle, in A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, edited by John Peter Lange, translated by Phillip Schaff (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Company, 1837), XXI, 6.

⁷Wilfred L. Knox, St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles (London: Cambridge University Press, 1939), p. 149.

⁸Andrew D. Heffern, Apology and Polemic in the New Testament (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 2.

was, if not native to the region, long acclimatized.⁹

This prosperous region with its many advantages and vacillating religious tendencies showed promises of becoming a center of Christian activity at the time of Saint Paul. However, the coalescence of different forms of faith and worship were not dominated by Christian belief and from the second century on, there is a history of "heresy and controversy, conciliar activity and vacillating policy, and finally decadence and decline."¹⁰ After the fourth century the Christian history of Phrygia is almost non-existent.

⁹Ernest Dobschütz, Christian Life in the Primitive Church, translated by George Bremner (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), p. 115.

¹⁰Lewis Radford, The Epistle of the Colossians and the Epistle to Philemon, Westminster Commentaries (London: Methun and Co., 1931), p. 51.

¹¹Francis Sears, "Epistle to the Colossians," Interpreters Bible (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), II, 138.

CHAPTER III

CHANGES IN WORLD THOUGHT

Prior to the time of the Colossian Heresy, Alexander the Great had destroyed the city-states of the Greek world and had broken down the social order. Old gods, guardians of the cities, fell from a place of esteem in the society where they had functioned. Instead of being complete divinity in themselves these old gods, e.g., Zeus and Serapis, became mere manifestations of the divine.

Lacking a sphere in which to operate, the old religions of the city-state all tended toward universalism. These universalistic tendencies led to a nature pantheism "with a feeling that the cosmos was instinct with divinity and that this same divine principle was likewise latent in the individual human soul."¹ The relationship of the person to the *κόσμος* was important "rather than the place of the person in the social order."² As the consciousness of the divine continued to grow the old ways of securing atonement lost their reliability in the eyes of men. It is noted that the growing sensitivity of consciences resulted in a seeking for means of purification in asceticism, sacramentarianism,

¹Francis Beare, "Epistle to the Colossians," Interpreter's Bible (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), XI, 139.

²Ibid.

and in esoteric knowledge. "One is arrested by this heightened sense of sin and the consciousness of the need of divine grace in the upward struggle and the new attitude of self-abasement."³

Solution to the problem of man and the *κόσμος*, for the Hellenic Mystery Religions, was found in various cultic actions. These were religions of faith rather than of works and the ascent of the soul was guaranteed not by its native powers, but by the supernatural expedients in the hands of sacerdotal purveyors. The divine within man was released by the correct ritual. Gnosis and communion with God were secured not so much ethically, as emotionally.⁴ The Mystery Religions were a union with God by rite and sacrament.

The great changes in the social structure influenced the Classical philosophic thought which also became concerned with the relationship between man and the divine. For example, the chief problem was the reconciliation of a belief in a good God with the existence of evil in the soul of man. Plato had suggested in his Laws (898 B.C.) that there was an evil personality in matter. Plutarch enlarged on this aspect of Plato. He added the allegory and myth of Greek mysteries, and was influenced by the orientalism of

³S. Angus, The Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World (London: John Murray, 1929), p. 44.

⁴Ibid., p. 82.

Egypt and Persia. Plutarch solved the problem of evil and good by placing Mithra as mediator between the dualism of light (Ormuzd) and darkness (Ahriman). He thus "kept Western knowledge and Eastern mysticism in a sort of balance and taught only a limited pessimism."⁵

Judaism

The spread of the Jews at this time was almost world-wide. During their captivity the Jews absorbed the cultures of foreign lands. Without the restraining influence of the temple cult, the jealous guarding of dogma by the scribes and the Pharisees, or the discipline of the priestly classes, the world in which the Jews lived greatly affected them. In Assyria and Babylonia they were influenced by the religious philosophy and myths, and in Greece the popular religions were partially accepted by them. These foreign religions should have had little appeal to the Jew with his concept of the living God known through the Holy Scriptures. In contrast with the living God, the myths should have seemed empty and pale.⁶ However, Philo of Alexander appeared, reinterpreting Judaism in terms of Platonism. Magic, evident

⁵Charles Bigg, The Origins of Christianity, translated by T. B. Strong (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), pp. 133-4. It is well to note that the Gnostic teachers seized on this and carried it out to its complete dualistic conclusion.

⁶Beare, op. cit., XI, 139.

throughout the Roman Empire, was practiced also by the Jews (Acts 13:6; 19:13 ff.).⁷ Heffern notes "the presence of pre-Christian Jewish mysticism . . . and speculative movements among the Jews especially among those of the dispersion."⁸

As early as 2 B.C. Jews were known to be in the Lycus valley region. Antiochus the Great had moved two thousand Jewish families into Phrygia "in order to secure submission of the inhabitants, who were disposed to revolt."⁹ The colony which was settled near Colossae had been transported from Mesopotamia, and, for centuries, the oriental Iranian religion had an effect on the Judaism practiced there.

Since Jews, Gentiles, and superstitious pagans lived together in the Lycus valley, it was not unusual to find Jewish synagogues and pagan temples side by side. The veritable medley of religious philosophy, belief, and practice which prevailed in the neighborhood of Colossae quite naturally affected the life and thought of the Jews. Knox tells us that the lax synagogues at Phrygia were particularly disposed toward the speculations coming into vogue in the

⁷Ibid.

⁸Andrew D. Heffern, Apology and Polemic in the New Testament (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 211.

⁹F. Godet, Studies on the Epistles of St. Paul, translated by Annie Harwood Holmden (London, New York, and Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 166.

Hellenistic world.¹⁰ There was "a tendency to adapt Judaism to the speculations by which popular theology sought to accommodate a theoretical monotheism with the conventional pantheon of Hellenistic religion."¹¹ The inscriptions of the regions show lapses from strict orthodoxy of the Jewish Torah for,

the Jews of these regions were descendants from the colonists established in the cities of Asia early in the Seleucid era before the reforms of Ezra had taken full effect. In this region the wife of a ruler of the synagogue appears as High Priestess of the imperial cult and as ἄγωνα θεῶν, an office scarcely compatible with a strictly Jewish attitude to idolatry.¹²

Knox expresses the difference between the Judaism of the Torah and Hellenistic Judaism,

Hellenistic Judaism was ready to adopt any philosophical speculation that might serve the end of expressing the supreme authority of His one revelation of Himself. Orthodox Judaism maintained its orthodoxy by a strict observance of the Torah and rejected that which conflicted.¹³

The Jews of the region were clear examples of the

¹⁰Wilfred L. Knox, St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles (London: Cambridge University Press, 1939), p. 149.

¹¹Ibid., p. 146.

¹²Ernest Dobschutz, Christian Life in the Primitive Church, translated by George Bremner (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), p. 115.

¹³Karl Braune, The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, translated by M. B. Riddle, in A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, edited by John Peter Lange, translated by Phillip Schaff (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Company, 1837), XXI, 54.

temperament of the time; namely, to listen eagerly to any new idea. It was this lenity of the Jew that made many of them convert to the Christian faith. This trend ceased with later Judaism, for Dix notes that

Jews concentrated themselves upon themselves and this was felt in the synagogues of the Dispersion almost as much as in the Holy Land. The old Hellenistic Judaism, which had furnished so many recruits to the Church in the Apostolic generation was reabsorbed into the new Pharisaic community, jealously closed to any outside influence whatever. The condition which had made possible the "liberal" attitude of the Jew like Philo both to the Law and to Greek philosophy, no longer existed after A.D. 70.¹⁴

Essenism

In discussing the world of the Colossian Heresy, the Jewish cult of the Essenes must be considered. Although the Essenes were confined largely to the land of Palestine, they influenced the Jewish race in their homeland and also in the Dispersion.¹⁵ The Essenes arose in the middle of the second century B.C. and were powerful at the time of Paul. They had spread over Palestine into the cities and villages of Judea. Among their marked characteristics were the communism of goods and of labor, frequent bathings, consecration of food to God, white linen clothing, and degrees of initia-

¹⁴Dom Gregory Dix, Jew and Greek (New York: Harper Brothers, 1953), p. 63.

¹⁵J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon (Third edition; London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), p. 93.

tion into the sect. They abstained from certain food and from marriage. The Sabbath was scrupulously observed and the name of Moses was revered second only to God. Godet sees in their rejection of the sacrifices of blood a Hindu influence and in the wearing of the white garments the influence of the school of Pythagoras.¹⁶

The Essenes differed from orthodox Judaism in their veneration and address of prayer to the sun. Lightfoot notes in this worship a parallel with the Parsee religion. Although the Pharisees maintained a resurrection of the body and soul, the Essenes, believing material things are evil, confined themselves to the immortality of the soul. The esoteric doctrine of angels, found in their oaths, links them to Zoroastrianism. Certain mystical practices associate them with gnosticism.¹⁷

There are several other characteristics of Essenism which are also seen in gnosticism. Among these are an exclusiveness in the communication of doctrine, a regard for matter as evil, and a belief in certain agencies as mediators between heaven and earth. Speculative ventures led, in both cases, to a rigid asceticism.

¹⁶Godet, op. cit., p. 172.

¹⁷Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 88.

Gnosticism

One of the incipient forms of thought with which the Apostolic Age had to contend was gnosticism in a rudimentary form. At the time of Paul's letter to the Colossian Church, the movement is hard to define. Many "thought movements" of a gnostic character were in the world at the advent of Christianity. In the New Testament the speculative basis of a gnostic system is nowhere presented or its principles discussed.¹⁸

The beginnings of gnosticism are lost in darkness. The church fathers concluded that the source of gnosticism was Greek wisdom. Adolph Harnack agrees and remarks,

For all the ideas of Gnosticism we find the way prepared for in the philosophic spirit of the time anticipated by Philo, and represented in the Neoplatonism as the final result of Greek Philosophy.¹⁹

However, there are other influences contributing to the full-blown gnostic systems that were present in the second and third centuries. "Gnostic tendencies" had been making an appearance throughout the Orient under the tolerant rule of Rome.²⁰ All countries contributed from their storehouses of

¹⁸Heffern, op. cit., p. 364.

¹⁹Adolph Harnack, History of Dogma, translated from the third edition (London: Williams and Norgate, 1899), p. 234.

²⁰Angus, op. cit., p. 379.

religion and none can be considered as the sole source of gnostic thought. Angus says that we cannot assign the origin of this influential movement to any one cultural, geographic, or racial source.

One can easily discover Babylonian mythology, Persian Dualism, Egyptian mysticism and occultism in the Orphic cosmology of a fall and the restitution of the soul from weary circle of reincarnations . . . Jewish theology, Greek philosophy, especially Platonism and Pythagoreanism, astral ideas, and mystical concepts and practices, together with the idea of a first or heavenly man of Eastern providence.²¹

Leisegang in his small but complete overview of "gnosis" sees more than the Oriental influence and says,

Die gnostischen Systeme, die wir kennen, atmen nicht den Geist einer bestimmten, orientalischen Religion, sie enthalten vielmehr juedische, christliche, persische, babylonische, aegyptische und griechische Elemente in verschiedener Staerke und Zaehle nebeneinander, so dasz sie gleichsam ein Mosaik darstellen, das aus unzähligen kleinen Steinen verschiedenster Art und Herkunft zusammengesetzt ist.²²

The masses of the day welcomed the gnostic doctrine for it brought the divinity out of the realm of the cosmos into a more real form which they could understand. The typical gnostic school of thought consisted of physical speculations of a philosophic nature mixed with borrowed ideas from many sources such as mystery cults, magic, and astrology. There was, also, the pretense of an esoteric tradition going back

²¹Ibid.

²²Hans Leisegang, Die Gnosis (Stuttgart: Alfred Kroe-
ner, 1955), p. 5.

to the ancients.²³ They claimed that their form of speculative knowledge was complete, for it was an answer to every question of life, here, and hereafter.

Wer wir sind und was wir geworden sind, woher wir stammen und wohin wir geraten; wohin wir eilen und wovon wir erloest sind; was es mit unserer Geburt, was es mit unserer Wiedergeburt auf sich hat.²⁴

The basic intellectual concern of the gnostic was the explanation of the work of creation, and the reconciliation of the problem of evil with God as the perfect absolute being. The kingdom of evil found in matter and opposed to God was postulated as an answer to the problem of the creation of evil. A Dualism results, and spirit and matter are opposed to one another.

The further question arises regarding the communication of the finite with the infinite. Since God is the perfect and the incomprehensible how can God communicate with man, the material being? The answer to this question was solved by the gnostic through the operation of mediators variously known as powers, aeons, angels, and independent beings, presenting "in gradation the unfolding and revelation of the godhead, but at the same time rendering possible the transition of the higher to the lower."²⁵ Mediators were neces-

²³Beare, op. cit., p. 138.

²⁴Leisegang, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁵Harnack, op. cit., p. 237.

sary, for farthest from the source of all life and creation is matter. As the lower order of mediators approach matter they become affected by it and become known as the power of darkness. The higher mediators are the powers of light. Man, who is material and entangled hopelessly within the powers of evil is subject, of course, to the powers of darkness, while his spiritual nature indicates a possibility for him to emancipate himself and adhere to the power of light.²⁶ This, then, is the central doctrine of gnosticism that unites many of its disparate elements; namely, that salvation was achieved by the ascent of the soul from the tyranny of the evil powers to the supreme God and the blessedness and freedom of the *πλήρωμα*.²⁷ The gnostic system contains a cosmology, a drama of the world's origin, which rests on the theory of metaphysical dualism in which God is pure Spirit, and matter, an independent principle, is inherently evil.

The word "gnosis" for the gnostic means a revealed knowledge of God, men, and the world. It is the means by which man is to achieve his destiny.²⁸ This revealed knowledge was not regarded as a natural thing, but it was "based

²⁶Edwin Lewis, "Paul and the Perverters of Christianity," Interpretation, II (April, 1948), 143-57.

²⁷Heffern, op. cit., p. 212.

²⁸Beare, op. cit., p. 139.

on revelation, communicated and guaranteed by various holy consecrations, and was accordingly cultivated by reflection supported by fancy."²⁹ This superior knowledge was possessed by a privileged few and hidden from all the others. "There is a distinction between those who have the gift and the vulgar who do not. Faith, blind faith, suffices the latter, while knowledge is the exclusive possession of the former."³⁰ The result fosters an exclusive aristocratic spirit, for the knowledge of the privileged few was divulged through the process of certain secret rites. The "mystery is not for common eyes."³¹ How one may die to the flesh and rise again into the life of freedom is revealed to the initiate step by step. The initiated begins to see by wisdom what a hindrance to life the body really is. Through such wisdom he begins to touch the fringes of the divine fullness and to enter into the hidden life κρυπτός.³² The means and the certainty of salvation are assured through certain cultic actions found in the mysteries and contained in the initiations.

Dualistic concern led the adherents of gnosticism in two different directions, viz., asceticism and libertinism. The ascetic tendency came about through reasoning that if

²⁹Harnack, op. cit., p. 232.

³⁰Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 77.

³¹Lewis, op. cit., p. 149.

³²Ibid.

matter is evil then contact with it, if impossible to avoid entirely, could be reduced to a minimum. The opposite view came about when the gnostic saw that since matter is completely evil and man completely immersed in evil, true liberty could be obtained through a cultivation of indifference to the flesh. One could follow his own impulses and still leave his higher nature unsullied.³³ Heffern concludes that "ethics on the dualistic basis in the gnostic systems developed whether in the direction of libertinism or asceticism."³⁴

We must be cautious in judging the gnostics as mere intellectualists. Dobschuetz warns that there was a concern for practical morality in the beginnings of gnosticism. Many of the gnostic sects arose because of a concern with the morality of the times. But their ideal lay in a different direction from the gospel. Their important principle was an absolute dualism between the spirit as good and matter or nature as evil.³⁵

³³Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 79.

³⁴Heffern, op. cit., p. 212.

³⁵Dobschutz, op. cit., p. 258.

CHAPTER IV

PAUL'S APOLOGY AS HE DEALS DIRECTLY WITH THE ERRORISTS

Throughout his letter to the Colossians Paul makes no compromise with the gnostic system present there. He was not prepared for a moment to admit that there were other mediators or methods of redemption than those provided by the gospel. His answer to the report of the new teaching was an emphatic and positive statement of the utter supremacy of Christ. The theme of his letter is found in 1:18 "that in all things He might have the pre-eminence."

The content of his letter falls into four parts. After greeting the Colossian Christians he prays for them that they might come to a full knowledge in order "that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing . . ." (1:10). By this knowledge they are to be strengthened to a full endurance (1:11), and delivered into the inheritance of the kingdom of the saints in light, "the kingdom of His dear Son" (1:13).

After the prayer for faith is the main theme of the letter, found in the second part. Here Paul shows the utter pre-eminence of Christ in His relation to the Father for He "is the image of the invisible God . . ." (1:15a), and in His relationship to the created things is "the first-

born of every creature" (1:15b).

This positive doctrinal statement of the person of Christ is followed by Paul's condemnation of certain features of the false teaching (2:6-23). He objected to the tendency of the gnostics to foist upon the Colossians their system of observances and angel worship which were linked with an extreme asceticism (2:18,23). Paul pointed out that the Christian is far beyond ordinances which are man-made and that they have no need to obey things which are only there for the satisfaction of the flesh (1:23).

Practical exhortations are the substance of the last two chapters of the letter (3:1-4:6). As if to contrast the gospel even more clearly with the results of the teachings of the errorists, Paul sets down the life that is centered not ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ but rather ἐν Χριστῷ . The Colossians were to set their minds above and let the peace of God rule in their hearts (3:15).

A note of gratitude pervades the entire epistle (1:3; 2:5; 4:18). Paul's purpose is one of gentle admonition and teaching. He was obviously trying to confirm the truth of the gospel as preached by Epaphras and expose the errors of the more "pretentious philosophy" which his converts had been invited to adopt.

The Congregation is Faithful

The congregation to whom Paul wrote was faithful to

the Gospel which had been preached to them. The same gospel which had been spread throughout all the world was now bearing fruit among them also (1:6). Though Paul did not know the congregation personally, he was with them in spirit and rejoiced as he beheld their steadfast foundation based on Jesus Christ, τὴν τάξιν καὶ τὸ στερέωμα τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν πίστεως ἡμῶν (2:5).¹

The congregation was familiar with the false teaching. This is evident from the strategy and language which Paul used in his letter to refute the errorists. Kennedy observes this and says, "Paul's description of the Cosmic Christ reveals intimate affinities with tendencies of thought current in contemporary Hellenistic speculation."² As Paul's purpose in writing his letter was to strengthen the firm foundation which had been laid by Epaphras, he used phrases of the false teachers to put the utter pre-eminence of Christ in bold contrast with the gnostic notions. In doing so he left only meager traces of the false teaching. Although his allusions were sufficient for the understanding of his readers at that time they are scarcely adequate for

¹Cf. Col. 1:3-8; 2:6 ff.

²H. A. A. Kennedy, The Theology of the Epistles (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), p. 155. Hans Leisegang in his volume on Gnosis also notes that "Der Apostel Paulus lebte im Weltbild der Gnosis und dachte in ihren Formen." Hans Leisegang, Die Gnosis (Stuttgart: Alfred Kroener, 1955), p. 3.

modern interpretation.³

The Introductory Prayer

In the letter to the Colossians, as in the other captivity letters, Paul begins his letter with a word of thanksgiving for their faith, hope, and love (1:4,5). He then follows this word of thanksgiving with an introductory prayer for the knowledge of God's will, using a series of interwoven clauses. He asserts that the knowledge, ἐπίγνωσις, came through the preaching of Epaphras. Their progress in the spiritual life will be by means of this knowledge, for it contains σοφία, spiritual wisdom to understand the truths of God, and σύνεσις, intelligence, the noetic faculty that grasps the difference between the false and the true and comprehends relationships.⁴ The purpose of this knowledge is to lead them to a type of life that is approved by God and increases in enlightenment by God. With ἐπίγνωσις comes an accompanying strengthening in power from the divine glory which prepares them to be saints in the Kingdom of Light.

Paul's introductory prayer for knowledge is brought

³Lewis Radford, The Epistles of Colossians and the Epistle to Philemon, Westminster Commentaries (London: Methun and Co., 1931), p. 59.

⁴A. S. Peake, The Epistle to the Colossians, in Expositors Greek Testament (London, New York, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), III, 499.

into closest relationship with faith, the moral walk in love, the eschatological hope and fellowship (1:9-12).⁵ The end of wisdom for Paul was not wisdom in itself, but wisdom based on the Apostolic word, on the gospel (1:3-8), and on the knowledge of "the grace of God in truth" (1:16).

The first allusion to the false teachers is Paul's prayer for knowledge and his use of the term ἐπιγνώσις for the usual word for knowledge, γνῶσις, e.g., 1:9. The word γνῶσις appears only once in Colossians, i.e., in 2:3. The false teachers used the word γνῶσις in referring to the "full knowledge" which they claimed to have; in order to emphasize the different quality of the gospel's "full knowledge" Paul uses instead the word ἐπιγνώσις. Lange quotes Wordsworth and shows that the word

is a full knowledge, more than γνῶσις, it is a gift and grace of the Holy Spirit . . . gnosticism . . . gave theoretical gnosis, while the Apostle gives ἐπιγνώσις by his ministry. One perhaps is theoretical and impractical, the other a full and living knowledge.⁶

Lightfoot also sees the "living" aspect in the term in his comment on the dative used by St. Paul in 1:10, τῇ ἐπιγνώσει

⁵Ibid., p. 500. For example, Peake points out in a comment on 1:9 ἐπιγνώσις that the whole council of God is not made known to us in Christ, but as verse 10 indicates, the moral aspects of God's will "His will for the conduct of our lives."

⁶Karl Braune, The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, in A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, edited by John Peter Lange (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Co., 1837), XXI, 6.

He maintains that "the simple instrumental dative represents this knowledge . . . as the dew or the rain that nurtures the growth of a plant."⁷ The knowledge which St. Paul wishes his readers to have is a knowledge that grasps and penetrates the will of God in every form of wisdom and spiritual understanding (1:9). Paul uses ἐπιγνώσις when he talks especially of the knowledge that is received from God and Christ and when he contrasts the partial γνῶσις with the complete ἐπιγνώσις.⁸

The errorists maintained that their γνῶσις was the basic principle of the gospel. If one had the γνῶσις which they possessed one was "complete" in relationship to God. Paul maintains here (1:19) as in Ephesians 1:17, and 4:13, that γνῶσις, instead of being the underlying principle of the gospel, or leaving us free from any ethical obligations (2:23) is as Heffern states, "seen to be (as in 1 Corinthians 13:12) a subordinate principle of light and power, by which love, the outgrowth of faith, manifests itself in every good work under the inspiration of Christian

⁷J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon (Third edition; London: Macmillan Co., 1879), p. 113.

⁸ἐπιγνώσις is used especially of the knowledge of God and of Christ as being the perfection of knowledge in Eph. 1:17; 4:13; 2 Peter 1:2; 2:20. Cf. also Rom. 1:21; 1 Cor. 13:12.

hope."⁹

The Positive Doctrinal Statement

After using the word ἐπίγνωσις for the knowledge that is given to men by God through the Holy Spirit, and thereby making the subtle contrast with the knowledge that the false teachers claimed, Paul moves on to the hub of his presentation (1:15-20). He shows how completely superior Christ is to all things, spiritual and physical. Although Paul's thought reaches metaphysical heights, his "purpose is not philosophical, but to show how inferior an imitation religion of the heretics is in establishing a relationship with God."¹⁰

The great emphasis in this letter is on the pre-eminence of Christ.¹¹ This should not lead us to think that

⁹Andrew D. Heffern, Apology and Polemic in the New Testament (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 268.

¹⁰Norbert A. Streufert, "Christ the Lord of All," unpublished Bachelor's Thesis (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1953), p. 6.

¹¹Fernand Prat, The Theology of St. Paul, translated from the first edition (London: Burns, Oates, and Washburn, Ltd., 1945), I, 281. Prat has headed this letter "Christ must be pre-eminent in all things" (Col. 1:18) and has also headed the companion letter, Ephesians "Christ is all in all" (Col. 3:11).

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Paul is forsaking the theme¹² of the love of God which he has preached since his early ministry. Although he shared the belief in the angels, spirits, and celestial powers, he would let nothing come between men to separate them "from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord" (Romans 8:39). In Colossians, the aim of Paul is the same; namely, that the Colossians would not lose their "reward" (2:18), which is Christ Jesus. He flatly states that he is writing nothing new to them (1:3-6,23).¹³

Paul's use of the names of Jesus Christ also points up the aim of his letter to stress the pre-eminence of Christ. Throughout the letter the name Ἰησοῦς is never used alone, but either Χριστός or κύριος are appended to the name. It is also important that in the body of the letter, Ἰησοῦς when used, always follows either κύριος or Χριστός (cf. 1:2,3,4,28; 2:6; 3:17). The kingly title of our Lord,

¹²Edwin Lewis, "Paul and the Perverters of Christianity," Interpretation, II (April, 1948), 149. Lewis states p. 147, ". . . heart of the letter is nothing new as Paul flatly states (1:3-6,23). The all sufficiency of Christ, both as to who he is in himself and as to the character of the redemption which he made possible for all mankind. This has been Paul's theme from his early ministry."

¹³Ernst Percy, Die Probleme Der Kolosser Und Epheserbriefe (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1946). Percy states p. 68, "Wie in allen Paulusbriefen sammeln sich auch in den Kolosser- und Epheserbriefen die verschiedenen Gedanken um ein und dasselbe Zentrum, naemlich die Erloesung in Christus; alles andere, Christologie, Anthropologie, Kosmologie, Angelologie ist durchaus von der Auffassung vom Heil bestimmt."

Χριστός occurs nineteen times alone and in all but one case,¹⁴ it appears in combination with the term Ἰησοῦς. Paul misses no opportunity to place the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ prominently before his readers.¹⁵

The Positive Doctrinal Statement serves a dual purpose for Paul. First, it presents the significance of Christ in his relation to God and creation in a grand manner. Second, he designs his statements in such a way that they indirectly attack the heretical position of the errorists. In fact, so clearly did Paul frame the doctrinal statements to counteract the gnostic teachings at Colossae that as Heffern points out, numerous commentators came to believe that the Epistle to the Colossians was not a genuine Pauline epistle. It came to be regarded as a deutero-Pauline epistle, written in the second century to attack the "set gnostic systems of that day."¹⁶ Paul was able to use in his doctrinal statement terminology borrowed from the errorists for he was familiar with the cults and religious practices of the day. Angus points out that Paul's long residence at Ephesus must have brought him, through his converts, into close touch

¹⁴Col. 3:17. There is good manuscript evidence for the addition of Χριστός.

¹⁵Peake, op. cit., p. 496.

¹⁶Heffern, op. cit., p. 270.

with the ideas of the Mysteries.¹⁷ Lewis notes that Paul had ample opportunity to become familiar with every false teaching.

Paul had a power of perception, acquisition, and discrimination, which was a result of his early training and discipline. He understood the Grecian Jews and many were among his close friends. He could not have disputed at Ephesus long without coming into contact with Hellenism and its modification; nor could he have disputed at Corinth for eighteen months, a cross roads of the world, and not met every form of philosophical and religious thought extant at that time.¹⁸

Paul's use of gnostic terminology is not the first time (e. g. Romans 11:36; Galatians 5:19-23) that terms borrowed from Hellenism have served as vehicles for the Holy Spirit in the presentation of the gospel to all men.¹⁹

When Paul uses terms and combinations such as *μυστήριον* (1:26,27; 2:3), or *ἀποκεκρυμμένον ὑπὸ τῶν αἰώνων* (1:26), or *θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας* (2:3), or *γνώσεως ἀπόκρυφου* (2:3), or sharing in the *πλήρωμα* (2:9,10), he is using terms employed by the gnostics not only to tell of the gospel message but also to show his knowledge of the

¹⁷S. Angus, The Religious Quests of the Graeco-Roman World (London: John Murray, 1929), p. 167.

¹⁸Lewis, op. cit., p. 150.

¹⁹Radford, op. cit., p. 60. "The indirect references can only be used tentatively and provisionally. It is possible that in some cases St. Paul is not laying any deliberate emphasis on a particular point of Christian truth, and still less deliberately countering any particular point in the heresy. Yet even here it is permissible to see an actual, even if not an intentional, answer to some heretical view of which we have evidence elsewhere in the epistle."

gnostic heresy which was troubling the Colossian congregation.²⁰

Three important terms illustrate Paul's use of the errorists' vocabulary. The *μυστήριον* was a term applied to certain systems of teaching and worship during the time of St. Paul. It was most likely used by the false teachers to express their claim to an esoteric knowledge acquired by visions and revelations.²¹ The content and end of these mysteries is ably summarized by Lewis:

certain secret rites may both reveal and symbolize the manner and process of deliverance. Those who would share this secret must prepare for it by prolonged mystery rites. The "mystery" is not for common eyes. How one may die to the flesh, how one may rise again into the life of freedom, this is revealed to one step by step. The initiated begins to see by *γνώσις* what a hindrance the body really is. The spiritual man (*πνευματικός*) is he who has come to true wisdom (*σοφία*). Through such knowledge and wisdom he begins to touch the fringes of the divine fullness, and to enter into the hidden life *κρυπτός*.²²

Secrecy always has an intriguing effect on the non-informed. The old Greek "mysteries" are known to have attracted scores of men seeking initiation.²³ The same attractive secrecy was presented by the false teachers at Colossae, who invited the Christians to share in a greater

²⁰ Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

²¹ Heffern, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

²² Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

²³ H. C. G. Moule, *Colossian Studies* (Third edition; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902), p. 133.

"mystery" than the gospel. The gnostics asked them to seek knowledge from sources other than Christ.²⁴

When Paul borrows the term *μυστήριον* and uses it in 1:25,27 and 2:2, he attempts to show his readers what the true mystery really is. It is the indwelling of Christ in the believer (1:27), and in Christ the true knowledge (*ἐπίγνωσις*) of God the Father is found (2:2). The full assurance of understanding (*σύνεσις*) is guaranteed the Colossian Christians for in Christ (the *ἐπίγνωσις* of the mystery of God) "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hid (2:3).

He is the Father's glorious Gasket, in which are shut up all the mysteries and treasures of grace, planned and wrought by Him, that, outside Him, "eye hath not seen them, nor have they entered into the heart of man to conceive."²⁵

By his use of the term *μυστήριον*, Paul also directly opposes the exclusive, aristocratic spirit of the false "mysteries." The *μυστήριον* of the gospel, the substance of which is Christ, is intended for all. It has gone out *ἐν παντί τῷ κόσμῳ*, just as it has come to the Colossians (1:6). In opposition to any inequality of knowledge, i.e., that the common man has simple faith and the elite have the higher *γνώσις*, Paul says that the gospel is an impartial wisdom (*πᾶσα σοφία*) (1:28) given to every man. *πᾶς* is

²⁴Peake, op. cit., p. 519.

²⁵Moule, op. cit., p. 127.

understood to mean (a teaching) free from restriction.²⁶

τέλειος (1:28) is another word perhaps borrowed by St. Paul from the errorists. This word was associated with the mysteries and was used to designate the person who was fully intrusted with the secrets of the mysteries, i.e., in possession of the higher γνῶσις. This term, then, was used to distinguish those who had reached completeness from the "vulgar herd of believers."²⁷

As St. Paul transferred the word τέλειος to the context of the gospel, it acquired an entirely new meaning. It is Paul's express aim to present every man τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ (1:28). In Christ every believer is τέλειος for he has possession of all the secrets of the Christian faith. It is possible too, that Paul, aside from the contrast with the false teaching, intends to recall Christ's use of τέλειος in Matthew 19:21, "if thou wilt be perfect (τέλειος) sell all thou hast and give to the poor and thou wilt have a treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." Any exclusiveness which could be associated with the word by the false teachers disappears when τέλειος is adopted into the Christian vocabulary by St. Paul.²⁸

Another word which St. Paul employs is ἀπολύτρωσις

²⁶Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 171.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 168.

(1:14). This also appears to have an affinity with the mysteries. When used by the errorists it refers to the process of communicating mystical secrets associated with angelology (2:18). Once the initiated was in possession of the secrets he was considered redeemed.

The word ἀπολύτρωσις is used in every instance by Paul to mean the deliverance from the wrath of God effected for men through the death of Christ (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:30). However, only in 1:14 Paul gives a precise interpretation of ἀπολύτρωσις, viz., ἡ ἀφεσις τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν. As Ernst Percy points out:

Ohne Gegenstueck in den anerkannten Briefen ist es aber, wenn der Begriff ἀπολύτρωσις Kol. 1,14 die appositionale Bestimmung τῆν ἀφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν erhaelt; dieser Ausdruck kommt naemlich sonst haeufig im NT vor (Mt. 26,28; Mk. 1,4; Lk. 1,77; 3,3; 24,47; Apg. 2,38; 5,31; 10,43; 13,38; 26,18; daneben das blosse ἀφεσις Mk. 3,29; Hebr. 9,22; 10,18), nur nicht bei Paulus.²⁹

Paul, by this unusually precise ἀπολύτρωσις (1:14), aims to make the positive point that there are no other methods of redemption or means of reaching God than the free forgiveness of sins given to all men in Christ Jesus.

The basic problem which lay at the root of the false teaching at Colossae was a perverted view of the mediation between God and man.³⁰ The doctrine of angelic mediators

²⁹Percy, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

³⁰Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

(2:18) was substituted for Christ in creation (1:16) and the function of Christ in the realm of God's grace to men (1:20). Paul's words in the Christological section (1:15-20) seem to be directed to this perversion of the person of Christ. He refutes the false teaching by presenting the works and the person of Christ as the accomplishment of the Father's eternal purpose for redeeming mankind.³¹ Christ is emphatically the subject of the entire passage, as the relative pronoun *ὃς* (1:15) indicates, by its position at the beginning of the sentence and the dependence of the entire passage (1:15-20) on it. Filson makes an important comment on these verses when he emphasizes the distinctiveness of the content of Paul's message, for here is seen "that New Testament combination of sovereign transcendence and initiating grace worked out in a view of God both as Creator and Redeemer, which is not derived from or matched by the thought of the Hellenistic world."³²

The gnostic presupposition that evil resided in matter led to a principle of dualism. God was the *πλήρωμα*, the fullness from which all things proceeded. Matter was separated from God and was created by Him through the medium of an inferior demiurge or emanation descending from God, the

³¹Heffern, op. cit., p. 211.

³²Floyd V. Filson, The New Testament Against Its Environment (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1952), p. 34.

πλήρωμα. Thus the "Central Doctrine that unites many disparate elements of gnosticism was salvation by the ascent of the soul from the tyranny of the world powers to the supreme God and the blessedness of the freedom of the πλήρωμα."³³ Since He was a man and associated with matter, Christ would be relegated to the position of a demiurge or one of the many lower creatures in this system. There is no indication in the letter that the false teachers denied Christ, but they certainly implied the insufficiency of His redemption as the sole mediator between God and man.³⁴

In opposition to the gnostic scheme of cosmology, Paul views Christ in His present exalted state. In 1:15-17, Paul makes reference to the divine life of Christ, either in Himself as the εἰκὼν (1:15) of the Father, or in His relation to creation, before which He existed (1:15) πρωτότοκος. He is the essential life of the creation for He is the efficient cause (δι' αὐτοῦ), the preserver (ἐν αὐτῷ), and the end of all creation (εἰς αὐτόν). Christ, as the πρωτότοκος (1:15) is then the absolute heir and sovereign Lord of all creation.

The word πρωτότοκος contains the idea of "dominion over" and is a reference to the Lordship of the Son rather

³³Heffern, op. cit., p. 212.

³⁴L. F. Wohlfield, "A Few Remarks on Col. 2:18, 19a," Concordia Theological Monthly (June, 1937), p. 426.

than His priority in creation. The false teachers could only claim Christ to be "the first of created things"

πρωτοκτίσις, that is the highest in the order of creation and therefore highest in the rank of the angels.³⁵ In Paul's usage *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως* is not to be rendered the first born of all creation. This would mean that Christ was created and therefore belonged to the creation. The following verses (1:16,17) show Christ's relation to all of creation. It was created "by Him," "for Him," and existed "through Him." Christ is not the first born of creation, but the first born before creation. The genitive case of *κτίσις* is one of relation and reference.³⁶

He is the First born in His relation to the *κτίσις* i.e., the First born of the Eternal, His great Son and Heir, One with Him in Being and glory; and thus related to the created Universe as its Antecedent and its Lord.³⁷

Since Christ, then, is the Lord over all creation, everything, *πάντα κτίσις* (1:16,17), i.e., the totality of all things that actually are upon this earth, is dependent on Christ for existence. Paul clearly points this out by the repeated and emphatic use of *τὰ πάντα* (1:16,17,20). Lange stresses the meaning of *πρωτότοκος* when he

³⁵Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

³⁶C. J. Ellicott, St. Paul's Epistles to the Philip-
pians, the Colossians, and Philemon (Fifth edition; London:
Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888), p. 132.

³⁷Moule, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

states that Christ

was before it creation and it exists only through Him. . . . Christ is the end of creation, containing the reason in Himself why creation is at all and why it is as it is.³⁸

Lightfoot states:

All things must find their meeting point, their reconciliation, at length in Him from whom they took their rise . . . in the Word as the mediatorial agent, and through the Word in the Father as the primary source. The Word is the final cause as well as the creative agent of the Universe. . . . It must end in unity, as it has proceeded from unity; and the centre of this unity is Christ.³⁹

Paul has thus vindicated Christ's reconciliation of all creatures to Himself. *πρωτότοκος* brings to mind the invincible majesty of Christ's power "to subdue all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:21).

It was to the angels and other thrones and principalities that the false teachers ascribed the function of procuring for men the reconciliation with God.⁴⁰ Paul's crushing reply is that these beings are in the realm of Christ's creation and also in need of redemption (1:16). The repeated *εἴτε* (1:16) shows that Paul is not concerned about defining categories of angels or other invisible realities, for they all come under Christ's complete Lordship regardless of rank.

³⁸Braune, op. cit., pp. 20, 22.

³⁹Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 155.

⁴⁰Peake, op. cit., p. 150.

The goal of the gnostic speculations about man and his salvation was found in the *πλήρωμα*. Their conception of the *πλήρωμα* was a quality found in God alone, which took the form of reason and was present in every part of the material world. The *πλήρωμα* was communicated to men through countless aeons, angels, and so forth. Heffern quotes Holtzman who states:

The gnostic view of the *πλήρωμα* was . . . a supersensual realm of the Godhead, in which forms of dazzling light of its aeons and its syzygies, i.e., aeon-pairs, bring life and movement and organization in the repose of the Godhead.⁴¹

Against this motley, confused multiplicity of spirits, Paul says, in the central verse of his letter to the Colossians (1:19), that in Christ "should all fullness (*πλήρωμα*) dwell permanently." Paul's use of the term *πλήρωμα*, without explanation, seems to indicate that it was used as a password with the meaning and connotation known by all. "This is proof that the word formed part of his adversaries' terminology."⁴² He indicates by his polemical use of *πλήρωμα* that what the gnostics sought to attain in their many mediators was actually found in Christ, the center and head of the realm of spirits. The *πλήρωμα* did not have a partial or transient connection

⁴¹Heffern, op. cit., p. 272.

⁴²Prat, op. cit., p. 295.

with Christ but dwelt permanently (κατοκέω) in Him.⁴³

In summary, Paul uses πληρωμα,⁴⁴ or plenitude, as meaning first of all the divinity itself, i.e., the sum total of the divine Being (1:9) and divine light, in contrast to the errorists' fragmatized emanations of that Being. Secondly, the plenitude of God dwells in Jesus Christ and in Him is the source of all blessings that He freely wishes to give to all men (Colossians 2:1,10).

The gnostic view of Christ was docetic and separated His physical from His spiritual life. Therefore, His death on the cross was not effective for the redemption of mankind. The docetism of the gnostics is that Christ

belongs low on the aeonic scale. His power is limited by rank. He was entangled by the flesh. His "way" is not valueless, but it is only an incomplete beginning. He showed himself subject to the cosmic powers on the cross, therefore he is not able to deliver man.⁴⁵

Paul maintains that it was "through the blood of the cross" (1:20), and "In the body of His flesh through death . . ." (1:22) that we have full reconciliation with God. As if to underline the human reconciliation of all men to the exalted risen Christ, Paul uses the stronger word ἀποκατάλλωσσω (1:20), meaning to restore completely, instead of the usual

⁴³Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 159.

⁴⁴August Neander, General History of the Christian Religion and Church, translated by E. Torrey (London: Houghton, 1871), p. 145.

⁴⁵Lewis, op. cit., p. 149.

καταλλάσσω , meaning to reconcile (Romans 5:10). This comprehensive and classical idea of reconciliation is contained in 1:20,22.

Direct Attack on the Errorists

The direct attack on the errorists, 2:4-3:4, comes almost as a digression from the main theme of the pre-eminence of Christ. Elements of the heresy are analyzed and exposed on the background of the positive truth found in 1:15-20.

Paul selects the salient points of the heresy which are to be rejected and indicates very clearly that he believed the situation at Colossae was one which endangered the very foundations of the faith itself (2:8). The purpose of his attack is to exhibit Christ in all His fullness as satisfying the suppositions of the gnostic type of religious theosophy.

Paul initially assails φιλοσοφία , a term used by the false teachers to describe their system. It is quite evident that their system, as a system of φιλοσοφία (2:8), does not compare with the great Greek philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, for it contains extra-rational elements, such as angels and visions (2:18). In the Roman age φιλοσοφία became perverted and was used as a general term to describe the practical as well as the speculative systems. Therefore, in the light of this definition the word φιλοσοφία could apply to the ascetic life as well as to the mystic theosophy

of the Colossian heretics.⁴⁶ Paul does not condemn philosophy in itself but rather the subtle system of the errorists. He associates the word φιλοσοφία (2:18) with the plausible rhetoric of the errorists which attached importance to wisdom and tradition. "It posed a philosophy or a theory of life; yet it was fallacious in argument and futile in result. It deluded with promises which it could not fulfill."⁴⁷

The substance of this philosophy was based on the "tradition of men" and the "rudiments of the world" (2:8), terms which are pregnant with meaning. παράδοσις τῶν ἀνθρώπων (the tradition of men) suggests that the false teachers were following the customs of their day and were trying to give stature to their teaching by claiming the authorship or authority of a dead or living teacher, the prestige of an ancient cult, or the discipline of an established system.

Such claims were put forth in connection with older mysteries. Compare Plato's reference to people who hawked the books of Orpheus or of Musaeus in the Athens of his own day (Republic II 314 E); and the belief that the Eleusinian rites had been ordained by Demeter herself, and preserved by tradition in the family of Eumolpids from prehistoric times (Homeric Hymn to Demeter).⁴⁸

⁴⁶Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 179.

⁴⁷Radford, op. cit., p. 59.

⁴⁸Francis Beare, "Epistle to the Colossians," Interpreter's Bible (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), XI, 138.

The words *κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων* expose this philosophy as purely human in origin and contrast it to the revelation given in God through Christ.

The *φιλοσοφία* (2:8) was based on the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*. Originally *στοιχεῖα* was a term used in the early schools of Greek philosophy. For the early philosophical schools of thought *στοιχεῖα* meant the ultimate components of matter: fire, earth, air, and water.

But for early schools, matter was not lifeless, but imbued with life. Primary substances were accorded many attributes predicated of the deity. The word *στοιχεῖα* maintained itself in this sense throughout the history of Greek philosophy and is one of the technical terms of the post-Aristotelian schools, of the Stoics, and the neo-Pythagoreans.⁴⁹

στοιχεῖα, however, also gained the meaning of elemental spirits or spiritual essences. It is in this sense, Paul perhaps uses the term in 2:8. The spiritual essences or elemental spirits were thought to animate all things. Therefore to abstain from material things was to free one's self from the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*. Submission to matter was believed to be a return to the service of the elemental spirits.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 140.

⁵⁰Peake, op. cit., p. 22. The chief objection in this interpretation is said by Peake to be that "We have no parallel for this usage of the word, except in the Testament of Solomon." But Peake seems to have hit on the logical progression of the perversion of the original meaning of the term *στοιχεῖα*, as the basic elements of the world, to the errorists' use of *στοιχεῖα* as animated elements.

The errorists at Colossae probably believed that escape from the power of the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* (2:8) that ruled the world could be attained in three ways: through the worship of angels (2:18), through prescribed ritual observances (2:16), and through ascetic practices. They attempted to foist these means of deliverance upon the Colossian Christians.

καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστοῦ "and not after Christ" (2:8) is the "sharp, conclusive, comprehensive negative"⁵¹ that Paul uses to refute the doctrine of the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*. His objection is based on the fact that the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* (2:8) replaced Christ in His function as the Redeemer of the world. Percy aptly states the situation that Paul faced in relation to the *στοιχεῖα* :

Fuer ihn lag der Gegensatz nicht zwischen Geist und Materie, sondern zwischen diesem Aeon und dem kommenden, zwischen den in diesem Aeon regierenden Mächten und Christus. Dies ist der Gegensatz zwischen hellenischer und urchristlicher Daseins Auffassung.⁵²

Paul repeats the theme of his letter: "For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (2:9), as

⁵¹Peake, op. cit., p. 44.

⁵²Percy, op. cit., p. 67. Another interpretation that is extremely worthwhile is that of Peake and other commentators. They regard *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* to be translated "not in the physical sense as in 2 Peter 3:10,12, but in 2:9,20; Gal. 4:3,9; Heb. 5:12; to be used in a spiritual didactic sense i.e., to mean beginning in education, the A.B.C. of knowledge, upon which childish thought the Christian as a man looks down." (Peake, op. cit., p. 44.)

a warning to the false teachers who promoted the doctrine of the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* with its implications. The warning becomes most significant as we look at the verse more closely. There is an "apologetic design"⁵³ in Paul's addition of the word *σωματικῶς*.⁵⁴ He adds this word because the errorists, by their doctrine of the *στοιχεῖα*, seem to have abridged the *πλήρωμα* which dwells in Christ. The words *ἐν αὐτῷ* are emphatic because of their position and demand that the word *κατοικέω* be interpreted to mean "permanently dwelling." *πᾶν* also carries weight and supports the truth that since the *πλήρωμα* dwells in Christ, i.e. the entire range of all existence and character embraced in being divine, one vainly seeks any fullness outside of Him.

St. Paul now affirms a series of possessions that the Colossian Christians have in Christ (2:10-15). Since the entire passage (2:4-23) is a direct attack on the errorists, also the statements in 2:10-15 are of a polemical character. In 2:10 Paul states that the Colossian Christians possess completeness in Christ, the Head of all principalities and powers. This completeness is beyond any fullness promised

⁵³Braune, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁵⁴Ellicott, *op. cit.*, p. 165, "a bodily fashion in the once mortal now glorified body of Christ." Cf. Phil. 3:21, "Who shall change our vile body that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body . . ."

by the false teachers. Also belonging to the Christ is the circumcision "made without hands . . ." (2:11). So there is no need for a physical circumcision. Their spiritual circumcision is achieved in baptism, where one is buried with Christ to rise to a new life because He has forgiven them all trespasses (2:12,13). Since they possess forgiveness of sins there is no longer a need for observing ceremonialism and ordinances. Likewise, worship of the elemental spirits must be eliminated for Christ has completely vanquished them. "He disarmed the principalities and powers . . . triumphing over them. . . ." (2:15).

The abrupt mention of circumcision raises the question of Jewish influence on the Colossians. The Pharisees at the time of the early church had been a force antagonistic to St. Paul. The letter to the Galatians gives evidence of this. "And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity" (Gal. 2:13). However, at the time of the writing of Colossians, between 60 A.D. and 64 A.D., the great Judaistic controversy in which the early church was involved had died down and Christianity was coming into its own as a distinct church apart from Judaism. There is, nevertheless, the possibility that the latent forces of Phariseeism were still at work at Colossae. Elements such as the above mentioned circumcision (2:11), the reference to meat and drink (2:16,17), and to asceticism (2:23) seem to suggest this. Although the

ascetic tendencies were not part of Judaism, asceticism was present in Judaism among the sects.⁵⁵ It is also apparent that the mention of food and drink goes beyond the Moasic law, which had reference to food alone and not to drink. The Jewish influence at Colossae, therefore, appears to be only slight or of minor importance.

If there were converted Jews, there was a small proportion for Paul makes no mention of them. The words "The Law which was against us, which was contrary to us" (Col. 2:14) does not prove the Jewish origin of Colossians; for the Law was harmful to the Gentiles as well as Jews for different reasons.⁵⁶

In 2:18, Paul specifies some fundamental characteristics of the false system which he opposes. He singles out visionary experience (ἀέδρακεν), self-imposed lowliness (ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ), and worshiping of angels (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων).

Paul's opposition to the worship of angels was not based on a disbelief in these ministering spirits. We know that he (Galatians 3:10) and Stephen (Acts 7:53) shared the Jewish opinion that the law was delivered by angels to men. Paul's attack was not on angels themselves, but on the belief in angels as a means of ascent to heaven. Knox clearly shows how the errorists exalted the angels and deposed Christ.

⁵⁵F. Godet, Studies on the Epistles of St. Paul, translated by Annie Harwood Holmden (London, New York, and Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 170. See Lightfoot's Colossians and Philemon, excursus on the Essenes, pp. 347-417.

⁵⁶Frat, op. cit., p. 281.

Angels became, instead of being "divided according to the simple Pauline antithesis of the realm of light, where Jesus was King, and the realm of darkness opposed to Him," rulers of the "higher regions of the heavens." Jesus was a messenger of God and raises men from the sphere of the lower air. . . . Jesus was not allowed prominence in the scheme of redemption. For to ascend to higher realms . . . required the knowledge from those who had access to more than Jesus had revealed.⁵⁷

Paul most certainly does not approve of the worship of angels, and his method of dealing with them is evident in this epistle. His primary concern is to subordinate angels to Christ and to redirect the worship given them to the Head of the angels, Jesus Christ.

The "self-abasement" or "humility" ταπεινοφροσύνη(2: 18) of the false teachers is connected with the worship of the angels. "Self-abasement" came about as a result of the thought that a person was not worthy to come into the presence of the great, majestic and distant God. The false teachers believed that since the angels were close to God and close to men, they could worship God in true humility through the angels. Peake accounts for angel worship on the ground that since "the whole activity of God was accomplished through the angels, one could easily fall into the error that the angels should be worshiped instead of God."⁵⁸ The humility then was purely a figment of the imagination

⁵⁷Wilfred L. Knox, St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles (London: Cambridge University Press, 1939), p. 151.

⁵⁸Peake, op. cit., p. 482.

since the false teacher is "puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind" (2:18). Chapter two, verse twenty-three shows that the real content of the humility is nothing but deep pride as Paul says: "The asceticism, rigor of devotion, and humility are of no value, serving only to indulge the flesh" (2:23).

Paul's answer to angel worship (2:18) is that one cannot secure spiritual growth through visions and humility. The angel worshipers did not hold fast to the "Head" (2:19) but dethroned Christ from His true place in the universe. By slackening their hold on Him (the Head), they cut themselves off from all the supplies of life and energy that flow from Him. Lightfoot summarizes the quintessence of the life-giving function of the Head, Christ, in the words: "It is the inspiring, ruling, guiding, combining, sustaining power; the main-spring of activity; the center of unity; and the seat of life."⁵⁹

Another outgrowth of the worship of angels seemed to be an ascetism that stressed certain ordinances governing food and drink (2:21). Paul quotes a maxim of the false teachers, "Touch not, taste not, handle not" (2:21). In all probability their curt sayings refer to the abstinence of food and drink. The last verb *διγὰρ* illustrates the thoroughness of the regulations concerning food and drink,

⁵⁹Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 157.

imposed by false teachers. It implies that "you are not even to touch . . . in the slightest degree . . . you are to keep them [the foods] from hand, tongue and finger-tips."⁶⁰ Paul, knowing that his readers were aware of the objects that the ordinances were directed to, does not mention them.

The apostle has two objections to the asceticism of the heretical teachers. His first is in a parenthetical observation on the essential content of the foods that the false teachers prohibited, "things which all perish as they are used" (2:22a). These regulations prohibit the very thing that God has given for the use of man. The false teaching, therefore, contradicts the very design of providence who had created all these things to be consumed and to be received as gifts of God. As Eadie states:

[the false teaching] believes that the eating and drinking of some gifts of Divine goodness is fraught with unspeakable danger, and therefore it makes its selections among them in a "show of wisdom." Strange conviction, that what is physically nutritious may be spiritually poisonous; and that what gives strength to the body may send "leanness to the soul."⁶¹

Paul's second objection concerns the observances of food and drink (2:21) and the "self-abasement" of the body (2:23) as having a close connection with genuine piety.

⁶⁰John Eadie, A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, edited by W. Young (Second edition; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1884), p. 194.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 197.

For Paul they have only the "appearance of wisdom" *ἔχοντα λόγον* (2:23). It degrades Christianity to make it a system of physical or ascetic distinctions. An objection might of course be raised at this point, for Paul lays down more rigid rules in 3:5 than any rules sponsored by the false teachers. A glance at his words reveals that he lays a greater stress on renunciation of the world and the practice of asceticism than his enemies. But Paul indicates in 3:5 that he is concerned with the inward man and not with the bodily members.⁶² The legalism that the false teachers promote becomes not only "a meritorious ground for salvation, but a means of sanctification and higher illumination."⁶³

The laws of the false teachers, so Paul teaches, are a return to legalism and bondage. The ordinances of food and drink set down by men are not a part of the Christian's view of life. They deal with a part of the nature which will perish and are a "tribute such as ill becomes the believer, paid to the powers of the flesh."⁶⁴ All the observances cannot hide past sins or charm God into giving men His grace. Radie quotes Cowper to show the fruitlessness of the false teachers:

⁶²Ernest Dobschuetz, Christian Life in the Primitive Church, translated by George Bremner (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), p. 114.

⁶³Godet, op. cit., p. 174.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 182.

What mean they? Canst thou dream there is a power
 In a lighter diet at a late hour
 To charm to sleep the threatenings of the skies,
 And hide past folly from all-seeing eyes?⁶⁵

All observances of food, drink, or other outward ceremonies become meaningless if intended to promote the already existing union of Christ with His believers. The theme which pervades the entire section (2:6-2:23) is the free grace of God in Christ, given as a gift from God, in contrast to the rigorous dogma of the false teachers devised by the minds of men.

Practical Exhortations

Paul's remarks in 3:1-4:6 are directly concerned with practical exhortations. He contrasts the gnostic system of perfection (and its inability to reach this goal) with the Christian purpose, pathway and power of life. In the light of the gnostic tendency present at Colossae, the directions contained in 3:1-4:6 take on new light and meaning. Paul shows his readers an ideal different from the one which was being foisted upon them.⁶⁶

The false doctrine at Colossae seemed to tend not only to asceticism (2:23) but also to libertinism (3:5). It is evident from 3:5 that the false teaching even with its

⁶⁵Radie, op. cit., p. 198.

⁶⁶Dobschuetz, op. cit., p. 114.

emphasis on physical abstinence (2:23) had failed to check the sensual indulgence that Paul points out in 3:5. In the light of the failure of the false dogmas to check these impulses, the Apostle asks the Colossian Christians to "set their minds above" (3:2), i. e., on Christ. Whatsoever else interferes with this life, they are to kill *νεκρώσατε* (3:5), such as *πορνεία* fornication, *ἀκαθαρσία* impurities, etc. This is to be done not by any ordinances that men have set up or through their own wisdom, but through the power of the new man (*νέος [ἄνθρωπος]*) renewed after the image of Him who created him (3:10). Paul's objective again becomes clear. He is concerned with the utter pre-eminence of Christ and here places Christ as the answer to the rigorous dogmas that men make out of their own imaginations. It has been well summarized:

The substitution of a comprehensive principle for special precepts: of a heavenly life in Christ for a code of minute ordinances . . . at length attains the end after which the gnostic teachers have striven and striven in vain.⁶⁷

As noted above the gnostics were noted for their exclusive aristocratic spirit. With this in mind, Paul notes that the gospel goes out into all the world (1:6) to every man (1:20) and finally, in 3:11, he leaves no vestige of the exclusive spirit remaining. We know positively that all exclusiveness and every form of aristocratic spirit disappears

⁶⁷Lightfoot, op. cit., p. 210.

when we look at Paul's statement in 3:11. His masterful contrast of four totally opposites, Greek and Jew, barbarian and Scythian (3:11) makes clear that the new man in Christ has a fellowship with all men. The first pair Ἕλληνας καὶ Ἰουδαίους (3:11) points up a racial and cultural distinction. The word Ἕλληνας signifies that one belongs to the Greek civilized world. Opposed to Ἰουδαίους it meant that it was representative of civilized heathen culture. Ἰουδαίους, originally applied to the tribe of Judah, came to be applied to the Hebrew race in general. The two terms carried an exclusive distinctiveness.

The Greek habitually looked on the "barbarian" races as descended from an origin radically other than his own. And the Jew . . . had allowed himself . . . to look on non-Jews as beings with whom it was a sin to eat.⁶⁸

βάρβαρος and ξύθης were terms of opprobrium applied to all foreigners. The difference was a matter of intensity. The term βάρβαρος meant for Greeks a person who was outside of their culture and therefore a lower creature. The ξύθης was a person on the lowest rung of barbarism and had a special offensive meaning for the Jew. Moule points out that there is evidence that the Scythians at the time of Josiah made havoc of the country. The term would then especially set the Jew's teeth on edge.

In order to meet the exclusiveness of the false teach-

⁶⁸Moule, op. cit., p. 215.

ers, Paul sets down these four terms. At the same time he means to meet the Greek and the Judaistic trends present in the Colossians' false teaching. He meets the Judaistic tendency by showing them that the Jew cannot lay claim to anything more than the Greek for they have all become a new man in God. Paul rules out the Greek spirit within the gnostic teaching that fostered an aristocratic exclusiveness by placing *βάρβαρος* and *ἐκύδης*, the lowest people on the cultural scale, on the level with the highest Greek or Jew. Paul recognizes no distinction. For him "Christ is all in all" (3:11).

In 3:12 Paul now particularizes the graces that the Colossians were to have since they have put on the new man in Christ. In opposition to the false teachers' self-imposed humility they are to also put on humility or lowliness of mind (3:12) and the other graces of the new man such as compassion, kindness, meekness, and patience (3:12). Christ is to rule the new man and bring forth love and true worship.

In opposition to the errorists' spirit of emancipation from authority, Paul says that the Christian man lives in due subordination at home and walks in true wisdom (3:17-22). The guarantee of the Colossians' permanence in the faith is contained in 2:23-24. "Paul adds (3:23,24) that the Colossian and the gentile Christian in general have their place in the great new world made new by the cross. It will be

guaranteed them if they continue in the faith that brought this new world to them."69

69 Godet, op. cit., p. 178.

The church at Colossae was subject to a teaching that threatened its very life blood. The false teaching was an attempt to dethrone Christ from His rightful place as Lord over all. The fact that the letter to the Colossians was written almost nineteen hundred years ago, does not mean that the teaching which St. Paul gives, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is invalid in the twentieth century. It is well to study this letter and to note Paul's principal message. His primary concern is to show the pre-eminence of His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The great facts of the incarnation and the God-in-Christ laying down His life for the forgiveness of sins are the stuporous sights which stand before his mind's eye.

We learn from Paul that in the face of all controversy, no matter in what age or time, we are to brush aside all error and concentrate fully upon the pre-eminence of the Savior. We hold to the Lord as Paul did, knowing that if we stray it is at peril of our lives in Him.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The church at Colossae was subject to a teaching that threatened its very life blood. The false teaching was an attempt to dethrone Christ from His rightful place as Lord over all. The fact that the letter to the Colossians was written almost nineteen hundred years ago, does not mean that the teaching which St. Paul gives, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is invalid in the twentieth century. It is well to study this letter and to note Paul's principal defense. His primary concern is to show the pre-eminence of His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The great facts of the incarnation and the God-in-Christ laying down His life for the forgiveness of sins are the wondrous sights which stand before his mind's eye.

We learn from Paul that in the face of all controversy, no matter in what age or time, we are to brush aside all errors and concentrate fully upon the pre-eminence of the Savior. We hold to the Head as Paul did, knowing that if we stray it is at peril of our lives in Him.

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