

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 76: The Book of Colossians (Introduction to Gnosticism)

Introduction

We have a little change of pace in this lesson. In studying the Book of Colossians we find ourselves face to face with a philosophy which plagued the early church and is still alive under other labels in our religious world today. Knowledge of ***Gnosticism*** is a valuable tool in studying and understanding much of the New Testament epistles.

The Author:

Again, internal and external evidence supports the letter's claim that Paul wrote Colossians. Paul identifies himself in verse 1 and many key figures in the early church confirm that claim. It also has many similar ideas and personal references in common with Ephesians and Philemon.

As far as we know Paul had never been to Colosse, but his friend and coworker Epaphras reported on the condition of the church, both its abounding love for God and other saints (1:7) and doctrinal problems.

The letter was written from Rome, during Paul's house arrest (first imprisonment), about the same time as Ephesians and Philemon that places it around AD. 60-61. It is, therefore, one of the prison epistles.

Tychicus was apparently the person who hand delivered it to Colossae, along with the letter to Philemon, and it was intended for reading at a neighboring church at Laodicea as well (4:16).

The City: Refer to map of Paul's journeys in the back of your Bible.

Colosse was a has-been city in Phrygia, along the Lycus River, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. It lay in the Roman province of Asia Minor in what is now South Central Turkey and in the area of the 7 churches mentioned in Revelation 1-3.

In the fifth century BC., because it was situated at the junction of the main north-south and east-west trade routes, it was a major trade and shipping center specializing in fine wool and colorful dyes.

In Roman times however the main road had been rerouted, by ten miles, through Laodicea bypassing Colossae. This brought about a boom in Laodicea and Hierapolis and a gradual decline in Colossae.

In Paul's time Colossae was a small city with a mixed population of Phyrrians, Greeks, and Jews. Its Jewish settlement dated back to Antiochus the Great in 223-187 BC.

The Church:

The gospel was probably taken to Colossae when Paul spent three years in Ephesus on his third missionary trip (Acts 19). It was Epaphras who was the key worker in the evangelism and growth of the Colossians. He was apparently saved during a visit to Ephesus and then started the church when he returned home to Colossae (1:5-7).

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Epaphras made the long journey to Rome to visit Paul in prison and tell him of a dangerous heresy that was threatening the young church. He was imprisoned with Paul at that time or later perhaps (Philemon 23). Paul wrote to address these theological problems and also wrote a letter to the church about the slave-convert, Onesimus.

Colossae's mixed population of Jews and Gentiles was mirrored in the congregation and was, in part, responsible for the heresy that plagued it. The false teaching contained elements of Jewish legalism, Jewish mystical asceticism, Greek philosophy, oriental mysticism, and pagan mysticism.

The Purpose:

The letter was written to address these heresies which eventually became defined as Gnosticism. Since this syncretistic (combined) system became a major thorn in the side of the early church and is revisited in many letters, we will spend the rest of our time today looking at it in detail.

The Heresy: Gnosticism

Gnosticism is not easy to define because it is a collection of features from several movements and belief systems. The term itself is derived from the Greek word for knowledge (gnosis). Until fairly recently most of what is known of Gnosticism was obtained from quotations of early church fathers, but in 1945 a Gnostic library was discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt giving us firsthand accurate evidence of Gnostic origins and beliefs.

Origins

Little is known of the true origins of Gnosticism. Many of its ideas were present in ancient mystery religions of Egypt, Babylon, etc., and was taught as part of philosophy before New Testament times. But most historians and many theologians believe it became an organized system after the birth of Christianity and it was a major threat to the church from Paul's time through the second-century when it was given its name.

1. It had no known official founder.

Though some in traditional church writings use the name of Simon Magus, the sorcerer from Acts 8, in association with the rise of the movement, we have no documentation of an individual founder.

2. It had no founding text.

Even though it has much literature associated to its beliefs, there is no text claimed to be its "bible" or founding document. This lack makes it impossible to date the beginning of the movement.

3. It had a cause.

This religious system arose because of a felt spiritual need. It was created to deal with the problem of the existence of evil in a universe. They were, in effect, trying to protect a holy God from any responsibility for evil in the world.

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4. It had a pluralistic approach.

Gnosticism borrowed freely from various religions and philosophies, nations and societies, both past and present. It is best paralleled today in The New Age Movement.

Main Ideas

1. There is a dualism in the universe including God and a lesser, evil being usually called the Demiurge.
2. God is unknowable and doesn't care about the world or have anything to do with it or what happens in it.
3. Various beings have emerged from God and have joined in pairs, male and female, to form concentric barriers around God. *This is how God is "protected" from any responsibility for evil.*
4. The female being in the last barrier (furthest from God), without contact with her male partner, gave birth to the Demiurge.
5. The Demiurge created the world, and since he is evil, all things material that he created, (all matter including the human body) is evil. *So, things of God (the spiritual) are good, and things of Demiurge (the material) are evil.*
6. A spark of the divine was planted in some or all humans, and that spark needs to be awakened, fanned, called back to the divine.

How can that happen?

7. A revealer is needed to call humans and show them the way through the barriers ushering them into the presence of God, or to help them become gods, or realize their full God-given potential. *Christ was viewed as a revealer, but not truly human. He just took over the body of Jesus at his baptism and left him at his death.*

How does he work?

8. Secret knowledge (gnosis) of one's true self and of the universe is the way of salvation. *Salvation is attained when at death or at the end of the world a person makes it through the last barrier and is re-integrated into God.*

From these core tenets a variety of Gnostic systems developed, all of which were a challenge to the early church. They ranged from systems with strict rules and ascetic life-styles, to libertine groups with no rules at all.

Dangers

For three or four centuries the organized system called Gnosticism went head to head with orthodox doctrine. Since that time its influence has been alive and active in many forms, and theologians today find themselves battling in the same arenas over and over again. Paul's warnings still apply as any study of cults, aberrant religions, and the New Age Movement will attest.

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Above all, we must remember that knowledge, even Christian knowledge, does not save. Only a relationship born of God's grace through faith in Jesus saves.

The Problems:

I would like to try to express Gnostic teachings in an understandable way to help us realize why it was, and is, so dangerous to the church.

1. The Nature of God

Gnostics begin with the assumption that God is good, even holy. Good start!

However, this led them to several conclusions that, though they may sound logical, are not Biblical:

If holiness is inherent in God (the spiritual), then evil must be inherent in matter (the physical), meaning God could not have created matter. All Gnostics are evolutionists.

Since evil exists in the universe, a holy God could not have created it and cannot have anything to do with its ongoing operation. How could a holy, loving God . . . ?

Therefore, there must be something between God and matter to keep God from being contaminated. That something, they decided, was a series of emanations, spirits, and angels.

This is how it worked. One emanation, spirit, angel, or whatever came from God, then another from that one, and another, and another, until one was close enough from God to have the power to create matter, but far enough from God so as not to contaminate Him.

Somewhere around the bottom of this chain was the Demiurge, a spirit, a lesser god who created matter, the universe, earth, etc., all evil.

The God of the Gnostics was not the God of the Bible.

2. The Person of Christ

Gnostics had a dilemma with the person of Jesus, the Christ.

If Jesus was a man, as the Scripture claim, He was matter, therefore evil. If Jesus is matter and evil He cannot be God, or created by God.

So, they placed Him on the list of spirits either at the bottom, nearly matter, or in the middle on the list in the chain of creation. This allowed them to interpret Christ in light of their mystical pagan system.

Some said Jesus never was a real man. He was spirit all along. Others claimed he was a man until His baptism by John, at which time the spirit, Christ came upon Him, remaining until just before He died on the cross.

The Jesus Christ of the Gnostics was not the Jesus Christ of the Bible.

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3. The Question of Ethics

Gnostics based their lifestyle on their view of the dichotomy of good and evil.

The Gnostic philosophy drove them in one of two directions in their daily living:

1. Since the body was matter and evil it must be subdued.

This led to a life of legalism based on a mix of Pharisaical Judaism, with a fanatical obedience to Jewish rituals; circumcision, dietary laws, observance of feasts and fasts, and ceremonial tradition wedded to secret rites and training borrowed from ancient religions, and often leading to asceticism. The Pharisees, Essenes, and many Stoics fell into this trap.

2. Since the body was matter and not spiritual it was not important so its craving must be indulged to excess, exhausting and satisfying it so as to overcome sensuality and be able to focus on the spiritual quest for secret knowledge. The Epicurians were the example of this approach.

Both of these approaches were tied to a special form of knowledge, a mystery religion, a secret only available to an initiated few who received special revelation from master teachers both alive and dead. Today they call them the *ascended masters* and thousands flock to learn the secrets of how to get through the maze to a god, whoever or whatever he is.

The ethics and way to god of the Gnostic are not those of the Bible.

The Answer:

Paul instructs his readers to "*See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the traditions of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.*" (2:8)

Next week we'll see how he counters these false teachings with true teaching, focusing on the supremacy of Christ (1:15-23), ministry of the church (1:24-2:7), and more (chapters 3 and 4).

Lesson:

1. God created, sustains, and is intimately involved in His universe.
2. Christianity centers on the question, "Who is Jesus, the Christ?"
3. There is no hidden mystery knowledge necessary for salvation. All we need has been revealed in God's Scriptures.

Bible Survey Lesson 77: The Book of Colossians, Part II

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OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS

Introduction:

Writing from his house arrest in Rome, Paul is attempting to combat false teaching in the church at Colossae. Epaphras, who was instrumental in the birth and growth of that church, came to Paul with mixed reviews of its spiritual condition.

Paul can praise God for the Colossian's *"faith in Christ Jesus, and the love which you have for all the saints"* and mention the gospel is spreading and *"constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth;"*.

The downside, however, was the influence of a "syncretism," combining ideas from various religions and philosophies with the truth of Christianity. The sources seem to be Roman paganism, legalistic Judaism, Greek philosophies, and ancient mystery religions.

The resulting heresy later became known as Gnosticism, emphasizing a special knowledge (gnosis), and denying the deity and saving work of Jesus. To combat this error Paul's asks the question, ***"Who is Jesus?"***

His answer is his argument.

Outlining Colossians was an interesting challenge. There are two possibilities for natural breaks:

I. Doctrine: Supremacy of Christ (1:1-2:23 or 3:4)

II. Practice: Submission to Christ (3:1 or 3:4-4:18)

or

I. Exalted Christ: Christ is Better (Chapter 1)

II. Exalted Christianity: Christianity is Better (Chapter 2)

III. Exalted Calling: Calling is Better (Chapters 3 and 4)

I have, in a totally subjective manner, chosen the second.

I. CHRIST IS BETTER (Chapter 1)

Paul begins with a typical greeting to the members of the church at Colosse then immediately dives into a discussion of Jesus; who he is, what he has done, and how he stacks up against other belief systems.

A. Deliverance (1-14)

1. The church has actual experiential knowledge of who Jesus is.

This is evident from Paul's choice of language in describing them and commending them. They are: Saints and faithful brethren (v 1); People of faith and love (v 4); People of the Word (vv. 5-8)

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2. Paul then prays for their knowledge and godly conduct.

The prayer centers on spiritual rather than physical blessings: Spiritual insight (v 9); genuine obedience (vv. 10-11); Moral excellence (vv. 12-14).

Paul's prayer is his first attack against the false teachers. They promised a special knowledge and superior spirituality. Terms like filled, knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual understanding were part of their vocabulary.

So he uses these same words in his prayer. He asks that God "*fill*" them with "*the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*" (v 9). The term "filled" is a key word in Colossians. Paul uses it here and throughout the letter and it carries the idea of being fully equipped or controlled.

Paul's prayer was that the people be controlled by the full knowledge of God's will, which would lead to obedience and moral excellence.

READ COLOSSIANS 1:9-10

And who should get the credit? . . .

God is the one who "*delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" (vv. 13-14)

B. Deity (15-19)

Of all the heresies that the false teachers were pushing on the church, the most deadly was to challenge the nature and deity of Jesus. Paul zeros in on the truth that Jesus was not an emanation, or spirit, or angel, or even the Demiurge. In fact, Paul looks at Jesus:

1. In relation to God (v 15a) **READ**
2. In relation to Creation (v 15b-17) **READ**
3. In relation to the Church (v 18) **READ**

God's intention was that Jesus have the preeminence and be worshipped because He is God, Savior, Creator, Head of the Church, and *nothing less*.

C. Death (19-22)

God was pleased to have His fullness, all that He is in essence, dwell in Christ and "*through Him to reconcile all things to Himself.*" (vv 19-20)

Through Jesus' physical death we have been brought from being "*alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,*" to peace and unity, "*reconciled*", to God.

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D. Demands (23-29)

The purpose of reconciliation is to achieve a new creation in which people, who were estranged, may know and approach God. Jesus has done that through His death, now we need to *"continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast"* (v. 23).

Paul is a great example of this "continuing": He is willing to suffer, in fact, he rejoices in suffering. His goal is to *"fully carry out the preaching of the Word of God."* He labors, *"according to His (God's) power, which mightily works within us."*

II. CHRISTIANITY IS BETTER (Chapter 2)

Paul efforts were intended to help the church know the meaning of, *"God's mystery, that is Christ Himself"* (v 2). Remember, a mystery is something once hidden that is now revealed.

The mystery here is that Jews and Gentiles are fellow members of the body of Christ, not through secret knowledge, tradition, ritual, or life-style, but through the blood of Jesus alone.

This knowledge will assure that, *"no one may delude you with persuasive arguments"* (v. 4). The best way to avoid error such as we will see below, is to *"walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built upon Him and established in your faith"* (v. 7).

A. Avoid Philosophy (1-10)

Again, the real threat of the false teachers at Colosse was their man-made doctrine that denied the deity of Jesus. The antidote for any false teaching is to be immersed in true teaching. Philips translates verse 8--*"Be careful that no one soils your faith through intellectualism or high-sounding nonsense."*

And the truth is that, *"in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the a believers covenant relationship (circumcision), life-style head over all rule and authority;"* (vv 8-9).

B. Avoid Legalism (11-17)

Christians are not subject to any form of legalism. The following of the law or any system of rules or traditions has no merit or value toward our salvation. Salvation is by faith in Jesus, who alone is sufficient to meet every spiritual need.

The believer's covenant relationship (illustrated by circumcision), life-style (freedom from the power of sin), freedom (from the debt of sin), and victory (power over sin), are all in Jesus Christ.

All these legal restrictions under the old covenant were shadows or only foreshadowing of the real *"substance"* in Christ.

C. Avoid Mysticism (18-19)

A Christians needs to shun, *"delighting in self abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen,"* (v 18).

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Spiritual experience can be misguided or even artificial, from our "*fleshly mind*" (v. 18). The answer to this danger is to hold fast to Jesus and function in the body. This is the source of the "*growth which comes from God*" (v 19).

D. Avoid Asceticism (20-23)

Many still believe that we are more spiritual if we abstain from certain activities, certain foods, or certain objects. Paul points out four weaknesses in falsely "suffering for the Lord":

1. It is not Biblical. Good things are for us to enjoy (2:22). *Also see 1 Cor. 6:13; 1 Tim. 4:3-4 and 6:17 and many others.*
2. It has no relation to the eternal (2:22).
3. It can lead to pride (2:23).
4. It doesn't curb earthly desires anyway (2:23).

III. CALLING IS BETTER (Chapters 3 and 4)

The beauty of it all is that rather than being captive to philosophy, or legalism, or mysticism, or asceticism, *we are captive to Christ.*

In view of the fact that we are identified with Christ by grace through faith (positionally right with God), we have the responsibility to set our hearts and minds on God (live relationally right with God).

A. Conduct (3:1- 17)

1. Put to death the "earthly nature." (3:5-9)

I believe Paul chose his specific "sin lists" in verses 5 and 8 from the lists of vices the false teachers taught against. The first list is composed of sexual sins. In their former life many of the Colossians probably practiced these sins in conjunction with their pagan religions. In contrast Paul instructs . . .

2. Put on the new self. (3:10-15)

The new self is one being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created us. (v 10)

This new self puts on "a heart of compassion, kindness, humility gentleness, and patience (v 12) . . . and beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." (v 14)

3. Persevere in the new man. (3:17-18)

Our continued spiritual growth comes as a direct result of our knowledge of and response to the Word of God.

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B. Close Relationships (3:18-4:1)

As the Word of God dwells in us richly, we respond by acting as we ought, especially in our closest relationship, the family.

In the extended family (including slaves and servants) of that time and culture, family relationships were clearly defined. Husbands, fathers, and masters had many rights and few responsibilities. but, wives, children, and servants had many duties and few, if any, rights.

One distinctly Christian contribution to family life was the emphasis on reciprocal responsibility. Paul always stressed a balance of rights and duties that coincided with Jesus' teaching concerning marriage.

C. Communication (4:2-6)

Another way a believers life is affected by "putting on the new man" is evident in two areas of interaction:

1. In Praying. (2)--"*Devote yourself to prayer*"
2. In Witnessing (3-4)--"*so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ . . .*" "*making the most of every opportunity.*"

D. Church (4:7-18)

The conclusion of this letter is an object lesson of the way a life committed to Jesus and God's Word has an effect on the body. it is a list of people who's lives Paul affected, and in turn, life that impacted he and his ministry as well.

Lessons:

1. There is no gap between the transcendent God and His material creation. Jesus is both Creator and Savior.
2. Christianity is not a secret society. Salvation comes by grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus, not through knowledge, ritual, or secret hand-shakes.
3. We continue toward Christian maturity by separating ourselves from all things belonging to our sin nature, and by knowing and responding to the Word of God.
4. This will affect our relationships with family and all other people.