

9/23/2021 – Colossians, The Faithful Disciple

Unit I: Introduction to the Thought World of the First Century

Reading: Acts 19

Although it is one of the shortest of Paul's epistles, Colossians contains the most profound exposition of Christology (the meaning, purpose, and work of Christ) in the New Testament. As is so often the case in the New Testament, this short letter is a response to distortions of the truth of Christ.

We have chosen to call this study, *The Faithful Disciple*. Faithfulness implies a steadiness, an adherence to something or someone outside oneself. St. Paul's preaching of the Christ summons us to both. Faithfulness for Paul is both adherence *to* something - the teaching and preaching about God's work in and through Christ - and faithfulness *to Someone* - the Christ whose total work makes and keeps us His disciples.

As your reading of Acts 19 indicates, St. Paul had a rather long ministry in Ephesus. It was during this period that a helper of Paul's evangelized the area of the Lycus Valley in which Colossae is located. His name was Epaphras. A careful reading of Acts 19 indicates something of the nature of the area spiritually. Acts 19:1-7 indicates that there were disciples in the area who had not grasped the full implications of the Gospel of Christ. Acts 19:8-10 shows the scope of Paul's activity he continued his usual missionary pattern of preaching "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). Paul never forgot that the Jews were God's chosen people and had first claim on the Christ. As was so often the case, some Jews believed, but many did not. Acts 19:11-20 provides evidence of the superstition and fear that infested the religious practices of the area. Acts 19:21-40 completes the picture as one of lucrative gain for the leaders and supporters of pagan religious practices.

Colossae was located in Phrygia, on the south bank of the river Lycus. The main road from Ephesus to the Euphrates ran through the city. Phrygia was originally part of the kingdom of Pergamum, and had been bequeathed to the Roman senate and people in 133 B.C. It was then reconstituted as the Roman province of Asia. Originally a wealthy and populous city, by Paul's time it had been surpassed by Laodicea and Hierapolis, two neighboring cities. The population consisted of native Phrygians and Greek settlers together with Jewish colonists who had fled Antiochus the Great and his persecution (223-187 B.C.).

It is important for us to understand the general tendencies in philosophy and the thought world of the day if we are to understand Paul's powerful presentation of Christ. The Hellenistic (Greek) world reflected a strong mixture of *philosophy* and *cult*. Thought systems were often reduced to religious groups which prescribed various *ceremonies*, *worship practices*, and a *certain lifestyle* for the initiate who wished to belong. The short but dramatic career of Alexander the Great (336-323 B.C.) in conquering most of the then-known world had destroyed most of the focuses of social life. The city-states of the Greeks and the empire-states of the ancient Orient now sought some meaning for man's life. The old gods who were the guardians of the community fell from their position of worship and esteem.

People began to look to deities that were universal rather than merely local deities such as Zeus, Serapis, and Helios. Worship, however, was most often directed to local heroes and deified men as "saviors" who offered the hope of immortality. Philosophers often identified nature with God and taught that each person was part of that divine nature. His soul reflected this divinity. As people, however, we are not very comfortable being part of the universe. We need a social order and other people for fulfillment and a sense of purpose.

Some philosophers tried to fill the void of meaning. The Stoics taught the idea of self-sufficiency, the Epicureans the idea of impassivity. These and other philosophical systems are ultimately an attempt to find in the mind itself a refuge from deep-seated despair. Such systems brought neither joy nor hope, but only a certain power to endure. In such a thought world many people longed for some closer touch with divinity than the universe can provide. They wanted access to a personal god. Thus, a series of schools of thought developed that came to be known as "Gnostic." It is a type of Gnostic distortion of the Gospel that Paul is combatting in Colossae.

Paul apparently wrote his letter to Colossae during his imprisonment in Rome. Epaphras brought him word that the work of evangelization begun in Colossae some five years earlier was being disturbed. It was a Gnostic heresy at its roots. The Gnostic boasted about a deeper knowledge (the Greek word "Gnostic" means "knowledge"). That knowledge was a deeper knowledge that revealed the supposed truth about God, man, the world. It also claimed a superior route for finding that truth. Ultimately, GNOSTICISM IS A RELIGION OF SELF-REDEMPTION. We know little of the formal nature of the distortion in Colossae. We can infer quite a bit, however, from Paul's letter itself.

Three elements seem to form the heresy Paul is battling. First of all, there appears to have been a strong emphasis on a profound and strange knowledge this new teaching claimed to offer. Paul calls it a "tradition" and a "philosophy" (Col. 2:11). Secondly, great stress was placed on ritual. Great stress was laid on questions of food and drink, festivals, new moons, and sabbaths (Col. 2:11-16). A third element was ascetic self-denial. Paul speaks of prescriptions of abstinence such as handling, tasting, and touching various things (Col. 2:21). He also mentions rigorous devotion, self-abasement, and severity to the body (Col. 2:23). These elements of teaching suggest that the heresy was probably Jewish in origin combined with various Greek ideas. Particularly significant is Paul's mention of circumcision, a distinctively Jewish practice (Col. 2:11).

The heart of the heresy - and the greatest threat to the faith of the Colossians - however, lay in the doctrine of angelic beings. Paul refers to the "worship of angels" (Col. 2:18) and to "elemental spirits of the universe" (Col. 2:8, 20). These spirits or angelic beings formed a sort of celestial hierarchy. Numerous titles are used for them "Thrones dominions principalities authorities" (Col. 1:16). **THEY WERE TAKEN TO BE MEDIATORS BETWEEN MAN AND THE HIGHEST DIVINITY.** Each progressive step in higher knowledge brought one closer to divinity. Taken together they formed the *pleroma* - "the fullness" (Col. 1:19; 2:9) - the full complement of divine activities and attributes. **SINCE THEY CONTROLLED THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GOD AND MAN, ALL REVELATION FROM GOD TO MAN AND ALL PRAYER AND WORSHIP FROM MAN TO GOD COULD REACH ITS GOAL ONLY THROUGH THEIR MEDIATION AND PERMISSION.** The Jewish aspect of

this heresy was the belief that these angelic beings were the agents through whom the divine law was given. The keeping of-the law was regarded as a tribute of obedience to them. The breaking of the law incurred their displeasure and brought the law-breaker into debt and bondage to them. Hence, they must be placated, not only by regular legal observances (circumcision, the sabbath, and various sacred seasons and food restrictions), but also by a rigorous asceticism and self-denial.

This new teaching called into question THE UNIQUENESS AND GREATNESS OF THE CHRIST. It is no mystery why Paul's exposition of the cosmic, universal meaning of the Christ is so explicit in Colossians. This Gnostic system was presented as an advanced teaching for the spiritually elite. Christians were urged to pursue this progressive "wisdom" and "knowledge" through a series of successive initiations until they attained perfection. Christian baptism was only a preliminary initiation. If people but pursued this deeper knowledge and its ascetic self-denial, they could put off all material elements until they were transported to the spiritual world, from the domain of darkness to the realm of light. THIS WAS PRESENTED AS THE TRUE REDEMPTION AT WHICH THEY OUGHT TO AIM.

Paul's answer to all this is profoundly simple. He regards this heresy as make believe. Any system where planetary lords played so prominent a part MUST ULTIMATELY ENTHRONE FATE IN THE PLACE OF THE WILL OF GOD! The Gnostics seemed to have held that Christ surrendered successive portions of His power to the angelic beings as He passed from heaven to earth. His death proved his inferiority to them, since it was they who made Him suffer! Paul flatly contradicts such notions. CHRIST IS THE ONE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MAN. HE DOES THIS NOT BY TRANSMITTING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GOD AND MAN BUT BY THE FACT THAT HE COMBINES GODHEAD AND MANHOOD IN HIS OWN PERSON! Further, Christ is the conqueror of these principalities and powers. Why, then, should one who has died and risen with Christ go on serving beings whom Christ has conquered? Far from being an "advanced wisdom," such service is a return to immaturity of the worst kind. Paul had pointed out to the Corinthians that the principalities and powers through ignorance had crucified the Christ (I Cor. 2:6-10)!

It has often been pointed out that justification by grace through faith - Paul's central way of talking about redemption in his other letters - does not appear in Colossians. That is true. It is also explainable. His major thrust in Colossians is to COMBAT AN INCORPORATION IDEA (absorption into the ultimate fullness) WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WE ARE INCORPORATED INTO CHRIST. The beauty of the Gospel is that it has within it the ability, because Christ is inexhaustible, to relate Christ to all things, everywhere, all the time!

Questions for Discussion

1. As you read the description of the thought world of Paul's day, what similarities do you see in our country and world today?
2. What connections do you see between the idea of "angelic beings," the enthronement of fate, and the spiritual/philosophical world we live in?
3. Where do people seek "redemption" in our society when they do not know Christ? Any similarities with the Colossian situation?
4. Pick out and discuss some of the contemporary "Christian" cults or distortions that you think have similarities to the Colossian error.
5. According to Paul, how does Christ help us "communicate" with the Father? What comfort and hope does this give?