

The Colossian Heresy and Its Implications for the 21st Century Church in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Bible does not define the heresies in the Colossian Church. The author of the book took it for granted and thus biblical scholars over centuries have been thrown into the sea of endless search for what the heresies are. This is because of the way they understand the problem at Colossae and the way they interpret Paul's admonitions. The purpose of this paper is to unearth the heresy and its implication on the present day church in Nigeria. In this work, analytical and sociological methods were used and data were gathered through secondary and internet sources in order to achieve the set objectives. This paper found out that these doctrinal errors grew out of a mixture of Judaistic teaching, combined with the whims of oriental and philosophic speculation. Consequent upon that, the paper also found out that in Christ there is freedom. Since the danger of being "taken captive" by the same heresy that was threatening the Colossians is as real today as it was in first century Colossae, the author therefore recommends that the church should contend for her faith.

Key words: Heresy, Philosophy of Men, The Worship of Angels, Asceticism, Gnosticism.

Introduction

During the middle of the first century, the Apostle Paul addressed a letter to the church at Colossae, a city in the southwestern portion of Asia Minor as well as to those in nearby Laodicea (Col. 4:16) to correct some deviations from orthodox thought. These deviations, grouped together, are referred to as the Colossian heresy. What was this heresy and who were the heretics? Did Paul intend to stop the advance of some philosophical sect? Was it to warn Judaizers who were arguing for circumcision? Was Paul informing the Colossians of their freedom from ordinances or from the ceremonial laws of Moses? Most contemporary Christians are unaware of what the issues were in Colossae and how the Colossian "philosophy" for instance is being promoted today in several different forms. Therefore the scope of this paper is on the various views of the Colossian heresy and its implications for the 21st century church in Nigeria

Introduction to the Book of Colossians

Paul received a report of the situation at Colossae through Epaphras (1:7-8). This report contains both good and bad news. The good news is about their love and steadfastness in faith (1:8-9; 2:5). But the subject matter in the epistle strongly suggests that the church was facing the problems of going back into paganism with its gross immorality (1:21-23; 2:6; 3:5-11) and the danger of accepting what has been termed “the Colossian heresy”. To guard against these dangers, Paul wrote to warn the Colossians against relapse (1:21-23), and also against those who deny the sufficiency of Christ (2:8-23) and direct their attention to Jesus Christ” (1:13-18; 2:8-10). “The problem in Colossae was that the believers had lost their focus on Christ and were being distracted by other legitimate things. Paul’s answer was to keep directing their attention back to Christ as the source and fullness of everything they needed.”¹

Colossian Heresy

The word “heresy” has become a loaded and emotional term in our culture. It often conjures up pictures of medieval torture chambers or people burning at the stake. In discussions of the Bible or theological usage it means no such thing. Heresy denotes “teaching, doctrine, or practice that is a departure from revealed truth.” Heresies are errors that arise from within, or infiltrate from without, professing Christian ranks². Therefore, “the Colossian heresy” refers to the particular brand of serious false teaching that was disturbing the believers in that assembly.

To Bruce,

The Colossian heresy is the “philosophy and empty deceit” against which the Colossian Christians are put on their guard in Colossian 2:8. Did this “philosophy and empty deceit” denote some specific form of false teaching which was finding acceptance at Colossae? Or was the church there being warned against certain ideas which were “in the air” at the time and which its members might conceivably find attractive if ever they were exposed to them?³

To Mattdabbs the Colossian heresy is wrong belief about Angels.

The Jews believed angels were involved in giving the law (Gal 3:19 for instance). It seems false teachers had come in and said that it was necessary to please these angels, principalities and powers if God must hear their prayers (see 2:16-23). In order to please them they were taught to follow strict dietary (2:21) and holiness guidelines as well as the observance of special days (2:16). Paul teaches them that such teachings are false and that Christ is still supreme with full authority over everything in creation that they don't need to learn on such hollow and deceptive teachings (1:15ff, 2:8).⁴

Huie, is of the opinion that "the internal evidence within the epistle indicates an early form of Gnosticism which was the culprit in Colossae."⁵ Paul's language, in 2:8 'Beware lest anyone rob you'... points to a specific line of teaching against which his readers are warned, and the most natural reason for warning his readers against it would be that they were liable to be persuaded by it. So there were false teachers in Colossae who were teaching the people heresy. He warned them against "philosophy and vain deceit" that is based on "tradition of men, according to the elements of the world and not according to Christ." The Colossian heresy will be discussed below one after the other:

Philosophy of Men

The Greek word *φιλοσοφία* means "love of wisdom". It was used for either zeal for or skill in any art or science or branch of knowledge. Lohse sets forth the underlying impetus of this doctrine:

Man can be suffused with the divine "fullness" only after he proves himself subservient to the angels and powers in the "worship of angels." He voluntarily declares himself prepared (self-chosen worship, 2:23) as he pays homage to the angels in cultic worship (2:18) and as he promises to obey what they enjoin upon him. Through his asceticism he withdraws from the world (putting off the body of flesh, 2:11; severe treatment of the body, 2:23), observes the special sacred days and seasons (2:16), and adheres to the regulations which prohibit him from either tasting or touching certain foods and beverages (2:16, 21)⁶

These practical dimensions of the error related to the way it viewed the person of Christ and His redemptive work. The false philosophy (Col. 2:18) claimed to have knowledge not yet discovered by the average Christian. In so doing it denied the all-sufficiency and preeminence of Christ. Paul therefore urged the Christians not to be led astray by following

after "the elements of this world" (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου), which are opposed to Christ (v. 8). Whether these refer to "regulations" of asceticism, angelic powers, or elemental spirits, the impact is the same. Paul wrote that these are not needed by the Christians because Christ is the "fullness" of deity (v. 9) and believers have all fullness by being in Him (v. 10).

Mike Scott opines that here in Colossians the specific philosophy Paul warns against is the idea that one must believe in and practice some aspects of the Law of Moses, along with secret knowledge supplied by false teachers and traditions of men along with the gospel of Christ (2:23).⁷ Colossians 2:8 warns about a philosophy that amounts to empty deception. The sources of the "philosophy" are: "the traditions of men," and "the elementary principles of the world." The Greek word for "elementary principles" is στοιχεῖα and it is used twice in Colossians 2 verse 8 and verse 20.

The term στοιχεῖα has a broad range of meanings. These include "elementary instruction like abc's, the physical elements (earth, wind, fire and water in ancient understanding), or spirit beings seen to rule over the elements (elemental spirits)."⁸ Clinton Arnold opines that "It is more likely that 'the philosophy' was indeed teaching that the στοιχεῖα controlled the heavenly realm, but the concern was much more directed toward their hostile influence on matters of daily life -- causing sickness, effecting a curse, bringing poor crops, plagues, earthquakes, and 'natural' disasters."⁹ Pagans and Jews alike and some Christian teachers at Colossae were looking for help in averting the work of the στοιχεῖα in their lives.

In Colossians 2:20 Paul uses the term στοιχεῖα again, reminding the Colossians that they "died with Christ" to them. Paul writes, "If you have died with Christ to the elementary

principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’” (Colossians 2:20,21). The στοιχεῖα (elemental principles) no longer are a threat to those who are crucified with Christ.

Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Celestial Church of Christ among others are some of the examples that keep traditions and elemental principles to date. F F Bruce describes it like this: “You died with Christ (he says) and in that death with him (which is what your baptism was all about), your former relation of bondage to the elemental forces of the world has been terminated.”¹⁰ The ascetic regulations were likely deemed necessary for religiously warding off the στοιχεῖα and their pernicious influences. Arnold summarizes the issues raised in Colossians 2:20,21:

For Paul the στοιχεῖα were an integral part of the present evil age. They function as masters and overlords of unredeemed humanity working through various means — including the Jewish law and pagan religions — to hold their subjects in bondage. The rules and regulations imposed by these “powers,” ostensibly through sacred and venerable religious tradition, are therefore entirely unnecessary and actually represent a reversion to a form of slavery to the “powers” themselves.¹¹

This philosophy was created by the meeting of Jewish Faith and Greek philosophy that was strong in the region of Asia Minor which claimed to be based on **venerable** tradition (2:8), was supposed to impart true knowledge and insight. Such knowledge is concerned with the “elements of the universe” (2:8,20) which are conceived as angelic powers (2:18) and cosmic principalities (2:10, 15). One has to establish the right relationship to them through obedient worship; only thus is it possible to gain entry to the “πλήρωμα” (2:9) and participate in the divine fullness (2:10)¹²

The Worship of Angels

Another form of heresy discussed is the worship of angels. This is a devaluing of Christ, it's implied in the much-debated phrase on "angel worship" in Colossians 2:18: "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels [θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων], taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind" (RSV). Two interpretations are given on what angel worship implies. One view is that this is the veneration of angels as mediatorial beings between man and God, who aid men's spiritual "ascent." In Greek thought the deification of astrological observances also could be what Paul was referring to, since the Greeks paid homage to the astrological forces that supposedly controlled their fate. A second view on "worship of angels" is that it means man's attempt to worship God as the angels do, namely, in His presence and glory. In the Merkabah school, to complete one's ascent and to even take part in the worship of God with the angels was seen as a deep honor. This latter view takes τῶν ἀγγέλων ("of angels") as a subjective genitive. Francis holds to this interpretation.¹³ However, P. Martin is of the view that, the errors Paul cited in Colossians 2:23 seem to refer not to some form of worship, but rather to a strict asceticism that is a form of human wisdom.¹⁴ The first view, the exalting of the angels, seems to be what Paul was addressing. This erroneous angelology diminishes the role of Christ, reducing Him to less than divine and making Him simply another go-between in man's quest for the "true light." In truth, however, Christ is not merely one of many mediators with God; He is the only One (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15). He is the only "Link" that connects man and God, for He alone is both at once.

Paul's statement in Colossians 2:18 shows that the false teachers at Colossae taught a doctrine of false humility and the worship of angels. The terror of the false doctrine at

Colossae was that the Colossians were not complete in Christ (verse 9) and needed to approach God through angelic beings. Since the benefits are much inferior to the Supreme God, the Colossians would have to lower their sights, so to speak, by approaching angels first.

The basic thought of his teaching is that the Colossian Christians need to reach beyond Christ to a Supreme God through the meditation of angelic beings. These beings were of lower standing on the ascending scale to ultimate truth. Therefore the believers, who sought to reach God directly or through one mediator, Christ, were presumptuous and needed a measure of self-abasement that would enable them to begin to lower down on the scale. This self-imposed humility, along with the active neglect of the body, would enhance their spirituality and their quest for completeness. Paul's evaluation of the Colossian heresy was that it did not amount to true humility, as they had thought, but to a type of pride and carnality—a mere “appearance of wisdom” (2:23) that was denying the significance of Christ.

Asceticism

This is one of the major heresies that the letter to the Colossians addresses. This asceticism led to two extremes. One was the deprivation of the human body. This included ignoring the needs and wants of the flesh in an effort to transcend the physical realm and ascend into the spiritual, which would supposedly help an individual, attain a closer communion with God, the true Light.¹⁵ The other ascetic extreme was abuse in the form of licentiousness. This school of thought held the physical body in such contempt that it was as something to abuse, sexually or otherwise. In Colossae the heresy included an abstinent type of behavior, as seen in their words, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch" (Col. 2:21). The problem at Colossae was a conflict between Christ and the "elements" of the world. Colossae was a great melting pot, and as such there was probably pressure for the people

there to be accommodating religiously as well as socially. Paul, however, reaffirmed Christ's preeminence and used harsh language in dealing with the heretics' "empty" philosophies.

The “Touch not; taste not; handle not” rules mentioned in 2:21 are not part of prohibitions of the Old Testament, neither are they an elaboration of any Old Testament command. As Paul pointed out, they were “based on human commands and teachings” (2:22). They have only a semblance of wisdom, but in essence, they are a pretense that does not lead to any honourable end (2:23). Self-imposed asceticism provided a feeling of superior spirituality. It gave the impression that the successful ascetic had managed to rise above fleshy desires and was now in a separate category. Paul’s teaching was that believers are members of the body of Christ, who is the head. Since Christ had triumphed over all “powers and authorities” (2:15), the members of Christ’s body do not need anything beyond Christ.

Gnosticism

Another Colossian heresy centered about Jewish Mysticism or Gnosticism. The term “Gnostic” comes from the Greek word “gnosis”, which means “knowledge”. The Gnostics were the knowers, the intellectual ones. Gnostics taught that matter was essentially evil and that the creating God was not the true God. They considered Jesus as only one of the many intermediaries between God and man. Some of them even denied that Jesus came in the flesh (1 Jn 2:23; 4:2-3; 2 Jn 7). They frequently denied that He died on the cross (1 Jn 5:6-8).

According to the Gnostics, the way to God was barred by a series of emanations. Getting past to these emanations to the true God was through knowledge and a series of passwords which only the Gnostics could supply. This meant that salvation was limited to only a few intellectuals (or pseudo-intellectuals). The Gnostics claimed to be the elite, the wise, the philosophers, to whom was revealed a secret knowledge which the overwhelming mass of mankind could never know. The intellectual pride of the Gnostics would have changed the gospel into a philosophy of which only a select intellectual few could be a part.¹⁶

Gnosticism was a complex religious philosophy which taught that salvation could only be achieved through secret knowledge. “Gnosticism was a heresy far more subtle and dangerous than any that had appeared during the early years of the church. It became so widespread that by the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. most of the intellectual Christian congregations throughout the Roman Empire were to some degree infected by it. It is not easy to give a proper and complete account of this potent anti-Christian influence, for Gnosticism was not a homogeneous system of either religion or philosophy, but embraced many widely diversified sects holding opinions drawn from a great variety of sources”.¹⁷ What Arnold shows about Jewish Mysticism or Gnosticism is that Jews and pagans believed in popular folk religion that crossed over the traditional boundaries of major religions. What they had in common was the idea that evil forces threatened their well-being and that certain “magical” practices were necessary to avert their influence.

The Epistle to the Colossians reveals the existence of ascetic practices taught by the false teachers (2:21-23). These ascetic practices became very common among Gnostics. “Those who favored unnatural asceticism often fell into the opposite sin of shocking licentiousness. As body and soul are entirely distinct in their nature, the soul cannot be defiled by anything, however carnal and gross, that the body can do. Let the soul go its way on the wings of spiritual thought, and the body indulge its fleshly desires¹⁸. Gnosticism was distinguished by an unethical, loveless intellectualism. John vividly described this dry knowledge which had no love or pity. Because the ethical standards of many Gnostics were low, John emphasized the reality of the incarnation and the high ethical standard of the earthly life of Christ. In Gnosticism, knowledge was the supreme end and purpose of life, but Gnostics were left in a loveless state.¹⁹ Although there were many different types of Gnosticism, they had several common features. With traditional Gnosticism, the emphasis is on obtaining more knowledge, to reach a higher plane of understanding. The early Gnostic

sought to reach this in relation to knowing God. Paul consistency argues in Colossians (1:9-10, 1:26-28, 2:2-3, 3:10) that man has sufficient knowledge of God.²⁰

In 1:9, Paul begins his attack on the Gnostic beliefs being promulgated to the Colossians. Paul states that he and Timothy have been praying for the Colossians, asking God to fill them with knowledge, that they may be fruitful in every good work. In verses 9 and 10, the word “knowledge” comes from the Greek word ἐπίγνωσις “It was a favourite word of the Gnostics who used it to designate the superior knowledge which they claimed as their exclusive possession.”²¹ Paul prays that all the saints might become possessors of this knowledge, indicating that it was open for all to appropriate, not a secret mystery into which only a favoured few could be initiated.

Implications of the Colossians Heresy for the 21st Century Church in Nigeria

It is good to note that the heretics at Colossae do not say that the Colossian Christian should not practice Christianity but mixed vain philosophy that based on tradition of men. They did not evidently deny Christ. However this is more dangerous because while not denying Christ, it dethroned Him. In the church today there are some heresies that have crept in which do not say Christ is not Lord but dethrone Him. The church founders or General Overseers have placed themselves in the position of Christ. Christ is no longer seen as the head and founder of the church, but the overseers. In most cases Christ has been dethroned in the heart of the members and replaced with the overseers. Church signpost, postal, public announcement of one’s gift(s) as a healer and deliverer are living proofs. The experience of the author as a senior lecturer in some of the theological seminaries further affirmed it.

This devaluing of Christ is seen in the phrase “worship of angels” in Colossians 2:18 “Let no one defraud you, delighting in humility and worship of the angels, intruding into things which he has not seen, without a cause being vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.” This implies that the angels are seen as mediator between man and God, who aid men’s

spiritual growth through humility by subjecting their body to ascetic living. As the Colossian heretics turned their attention from Christ, the head, they vainly attempted to attain righteousness through asceticism and self-abuse. The freedom presented by Christ was being changed for slavery to the elements of this world. The exalting of the angels is what Paul was addressing. This erroneous angelology diminishes the role of Christ, reducing Him to less than divine and making Him another mediator, however, Christ is not merely one of many mediators. He is the only one (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15). He is the only link that connects man and God. Christ only should be the head and the center of worship of the Christian church.

As the philosophy that is based on human tradition is a threat to the Colossian church so also “the philosophies of the culture around us can be just as tempting”. In fact, they can have “the appearance of wisdom,” but still “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (2:23). As such, they are nothing but “empty deceit” (2:8).” In contemporary church, the drive for an experience of worship can at times overshadow a proper understanding of Christ’s sufficiency. Our worship may be reduced to a mere “self-made worship” rather than worship centered in God’s revelation. We ought therefore to seek an experience that is pleasing to God rather than us, and that worship should never be sought at the expense of dishonoring Christ.

The contemporary church has to listen to what Paul said about the truth concerning Christ because Paul believed that if we have the truth we won’t be led astray by false teachings (Col 2:8-15). The 21 century church is in the age of modernization. Civilization in itself is not false teaching but it can lead to false teaching and to some very profound insights regarding our faith. We must not let our modernization and worldview carry us away (Col.2:8) from Christ. We might get so caught up in the modern perspective that we fail to see a need for Christ in our lives. That is the Paul’s point in Colossian 2:9-10. In Colossian

2:11-15, Paul laid out all that Christ has done for us. In the light of the above verses we should realize that modernization must draw us closer to God and not further away from Him.

Conclusion

The Colossian heresy has been described as syncretistic, that is, it was composed of elements drawn from paganism, Judaism, and Christianity. That is obvious when one examines the legal ordinances, circumcision, food regulations, Sabbath, new moons and other “events” of the Jewish calendar. Consequently in this paper, author saw Paul ultimately proving that in Christ there is freedom. Jesus Christ gives freedom from enticing words (2.4-7), freedom from vain philosophy (2.8-10), freedom from humanity’s judgment (2.11-17), freedom from improper worship (2.18, 19), and freedom from humanity’s doctrines/teachings (2.20-23). Therefore, the danger of being “taken captive” by the same heresy that was threatening the Colossians is as real today as it was in first century Colossae.

Endnotes

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