

First Christian Church of Napa – Colossians 2

Introducing Colossians – see “bring it home study”

Colossians 2

Kim Yeng and his family celebrated the day they became American citizens. Now they were no longer refugees but free citizens with full privileges and endless opportunities. But soon the neighbors began to question Kim. "Why are you making your kids superpatriots? They don't have to wear flags on their shirts every day." "Why did you spend all that money installing a tall flagpole in your yard?" "Don't you know that making your family eat hamburgers instead of eggrolls doesn't make you a better citizen?"

In this study, Paul questions the Colossians about the foolish human additions they are trying to add to all they have in Christ.

1. How would you finish the following sentence: "I would feel fulfilled if . . ."

2. Read Col. 2:6-15. What does it mean to "receive Christ Jesus as Lord" (Col. 2:6)?

3. How do each of the images *rooted*, *built up*, *strengthened* and *overflowing* (Col. 2:7) help us understand how we should continue to live in Christ?

4. In Col. 2:8 we get the first real glimpse of the heresy being taught to the Colossians. What do we learn about it?

5. How would Paul's two statements about fullness in Christ (Col. 2:9-10) protect the Colossians from those deceptive ideas?

6. In Col. 2:11-15 Paul describes some of what "fullness in Christ" includes. Which of our basic needs did Jesus' death, burial and resurrection meet?

7. Why did Jesus have to take care of our sinful nature (Col. 2:11) as well as our sins (Col. 2:13)?

8. A *written code* (Col. 2:14) was a signed confession, listing personal debts. What has Christ done with this certificate that was "against us" and "opposed to us"?

9. A *triumph* (Col. 2:15) was "the victory parade given for conquering generals when they returned to Rome. In the victory celebration the defeated enemies, bound in chains, were dragged through the city. Then came the conquering general riding in a chariot, receiving the acclamation of the spectators who benefited from his victory."¹ Who are the "powers and authorities" (Col. 2:15) Christ disarmed and triumphed over (see Ephes. 6:12)?

10. Silently reread Col. 2:9-15, inserting your name every time Paul says *you* or *us*. How do these facts affect your view of yourself?

11. Read Col. 2:16-23. What "shadows" were the Colossians adding to the "reality" they had found in Christ (Col. 2:16-17, 20-23)?

What "shadows" are we tempted to add today?

12. What is the appeal of such additions (Col. 2:18-19, 22-23)?

13. Why are these regulations useless (Col. 2:22-23)?

14. How does the following hymn help you grasp the implications of your fullness in Christ?

Complete in Thee! no work of mine
May take, dear Lord, the place of Thine;
Thy blood hath pardon bought for me,
And I am now complete in Thee.

Complete in Thee! no more shall sin,
Thy grace hath conquered, reign within;
Thy voice shall bid the tempter flee,
And I shall stand complete in Thee.

Complete in Thee! each want supplied,
And no good thing to me denied;
Since Thou my portion, Lord, wilt be,
I ask no more, complete in Thee.

Dear Saviour! when before thy bar
All tribes and tongues assembled are,
Among Thy chosen will I be,
At Thy right hand complete in Thee.

Cecil F. Alexander (1818-1895)

Background Colossians

Although Paul wrote to the church at Colossae from house arrest in Rome, the power of Christ was not chained. Throughout his refutation of heresy, Paul points out that Christ is the image of God, the sustainer, the source. Even if some new, attractive teaching seems substantial, it is hollow and deceptive next to the fullness of Christ. By demonstrating the supremacy of Christ, Paul hopes to refocus the attention of the Colossians "on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1).

Mixing Greek and oriental ideas and practices was so popular in the first century that we have a word for it: syncretism. Everybody wanted to mix his or her own blend of Greek, Roman, Persian, Egyptian, and other doctrines to suit personal taste. Judaism had already absorbed many Greek ideas, and when Gentiles embraced Christianity, they naturally wanted to mix their former beliefs and customs with their new faith.

By the time the Colossian church was established, a pattern was beginning to emerge among the religious recipes being mixed throughout the Empire. We call this semi-standard recipe "Gnosticism," although it was not standardized enough to be called that until the second century AD.

The Gnostics borrowed from at least four areas of tradition: the philosophy of Plato, oriental religion, Judaism, and Christianity. It was perhaps the "borrowing" from Christianity that was most disturbing to Paul, as those who brought such teaching were not just looking for listeners, but for converts. Among the teachings of the Gnostics were:

1. The material world is essentially evil or, at best, indifferent. If the material world is evil, then the body is evil. The body must be kept in place then, by rigorously holding it in check. How does one do this? "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Col. 2:21). Paul probably was quoting from the catchwords of the false teachers.
2. Between God and matter lie a host of fallen (evil) spiritual powers, who now rule the world. Jesus was the first of these rulers; He rules alongside other spiritual powers, such as the constellations named in the signs of the Zodiac and the angels. Therefore, He is only one of many bridges to God.
3. Some human beings possess a divine spark, an inner self that is different from the soul (the Gnostics were these human beings, of course). This inner self is the true home of such people, which they may reach through a mystical knowledge, a true seeing and hearing.
4. Redemption is ultimately dependent on the individual's self-understanding and the resulting freedom it provides, rather than on God. Hence the emphasis on knowledge of secrets rather than on faith.

Since Paul only alludes to their doctrines, we may have a hard time figuring out precisely what the false teachers were saying. However, we can make some educated guesses from what Paul criticizes and encourages. Some of the false doctrines were:

1. Ceremonialism. There were "strict rules about the kinds of permissible food and drink, religious festivals (Col. 2:16-17) and circumcision (Col. 2:11; Col. 3:11)."
2. Asceticism. Rules that Paul summarizes as, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch" (Col. 2:21) and "harsh treatment of the body" (Col. 2:23) were supposed to achieve purity.
3. Angel worship. See Col. 2:18.
4. Deprecation of Christ. Paul stressed Christ's supremacy (Col. 1:15-20; Col. 2:2-3, 9) against those who taught that Christ was on the level of a created angel.
5. Secret knowledge. Salvation required not just faith in Christ but knowledge of certain mysteries (Col. 2:3, 8).
6. Reliance on human wisdom and tradition. See Col. 2:4, 8. These elements seem to be drawn from "an extreme form of Judaism" from pagan ideas that later became a system called "Gnosticism" (from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge").