# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

## The Dangerous Teaching at Colossae

Colossians 2.6-23

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### *Introduction*

I'll begin with three conclusions drawn from what we see from the entirety of Scripture.

- All views about reality and how to live can be divided into two categories: God's ways and human ways (cf. Isa. 55.8-9; Matt 7.13-27; 1 Cor 2.6-8).
- God's people are not shielded from challenges posed by human ways in competition with God's; that was true for ancient Israel and the ancient church and remains true for us (cf. Rom 12.2; 1 John 2.15-17).
- In all the New Testament writings, but especially in the epistles, we see a variety of challenges to God's ways; the writings also provide insight for how to respond.

It is in Colossians 2.8 that the human way challenging the Colossian church is first made explicit. They were being "take[n] captive" (present participle form of συλαγωγέω, *sylagōgeō*), a word commonly used for the plundering of a ship's cargo. The method of capture was a system of thought, a "philosophy (φιλοσοφία; *philosophia*) and empty deceit (ἀπάτη; *apatē*), according to human tradition (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων; *tēn paradosin tōn anthrōpōn*), according to the elemental spirits of the world (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου; *ta stoicheia tou kosmou*), and not according to Christ."

Verses 9-23 record Paul's response, but we should note the fact that the text does not present a full statement of the objectionable doctrine in the words of its proponents. As he proceeds, Paul's references to components of the view provide insight into its particulars. But since we are reading only half the conversation, we must proceed cautiously in our effort to delineate its components and determine the background and views of its proponents.

In this discussion, I will look at the challenge in broad terms.[1]

### *Seeking to Understand the Challenge*

The first question to address is whether we are dealing with a formal "Colossian Heresy." Although introductions to Colossians typically use that title, the matter is not as straightforward as it suggests. First, as noted above, we do not have a complete statement of a

belief system. So, those who "prefer to speak in terms of tendencies rather than a clear-cut system with definite points" (O'Brien, 148) make a valid point. It is certainly possible that, as new converts, some of the Colossians grafted beliefs from their previous way of life onto their newfound Christian beliefs. However, the way Paul used certain terms in his response does suggest that there was a definite form to his opponents' views.[2] Thus, we can properly use the word "heresy" to describe the teaching.

An examination of Paul's comments reveals some distinctive teachings. First, the words, "philosophy" (*philosophia*) and "tradition" (*paradosis*) point to a system of thought that was being passed down. In particular, the word "tradition," the handing down of beliefs and practices, denotes something with "antiquity, dignity and revelational character" (O'Brien, 148), in other words, a collection of views that in some sense hung together. Verse 23 would seem to support this conclusion.

It is also true that, as he proceeds, Paul sounds as if he is quoting some of his opponents' catchwords.

- In 2.9, he affirms that "all the fullness" really is found in Christ.
- In 2.18, he says they are "delighting in humility" (θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ, *thelōn en tapeinophrosunē*; ESV has "insisting on asceticism") "and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions (ESV)." Those phrases sound as if they had been used to refer to features of a thought system.
- In 2.21, specific regulations are mentioned, apparently practices that resulted from submission to "the elemental spirits of the world" (τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, *tōn stoicheiōn tou kosmou*) that were mentioned in 2.20.
- In 2.23, Paul says that the practices referenced in verse 21 may have "the appearance of wisdom," but are in fact of no real value for "stopping the indulgence of the flesh" even though they promote "self-made religion," "humility" (ESV-"asceticism"), and "severity to the body," things that sound like practices in a religious system.

What to make of these distinguishing marks has been debated. Based on Paul's statements, much of what is depicted is Jewish in nature; some think it is all Jewish. Certainly, some things immediately stand out as Jewish (vv. 11, 16). But other features are broader in scope or are not as popularly known to be Jewish. Examples include extreme asceticism, angel worship, and visions (vv. 18, 23).

Other terms also have backgrounds in non-Jewish cultures. Some think "the elements (*stoicheia*) of the world" (vv. 8, 20) are parallel to "principalities and powers" (vv. 10, 15). Clinton Arnold writes,

> *Stoicheia* is sometimes translated "the basic principles" of the world and then interpreted to be something like the fundamental principles of pagan religion. In the ancient world, however, the term *stoicheia* was widely used for spirits in Persian religious texts, magical papyri, astrological documents, and some Jewish texts.[3]

As we seek to resolve this question, we should consider the history of Judaism in Colossae. The ancestors of the Jews who lived there in the first century had been relocated to Colossae as part of colonization efforts by the Persians and Greeks. The surrounding region of Asia Minor was also a syncretistic religious culture.

In such an environment, it is not hard to imagine that some would pick what they thought were good features from the surrounding religious offerings and incorporate them with their Christian beliefs. This would result in a syncretistic blending of old religions with the new. However, in view of the Jew-first plan of proclamation utilized by Paul (cf. Rom 1.16), it is not inconceivable that that the heresy was mainly, if not exclusively Jewish in origin, just not the Judaism of Judea (or even Galatia). O'Brien's conclusion is instructive:

> Many recent scholars … consider that the false teaching, which advanced beyond Epaphras's elementary gospel is to be read against the background of ascetic and mystical forms of Jewish piety (as evidenced, for example, at Qumran). It was for a spiritual elite who were being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge so as to attain true 'fulness.' 'Self-abasement' (Col 2:18, 23) was a term used by opponents to denote ascetic practices that were effective for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries and participating in mystical experiences. The 'mature' were thus able to gain entrance into heaven and join in the 'angelic worship of God' as part of their present experience (Col 2:18) (O'Brien, 149).

## *How Paul Responded to the Heresy*

*First, he met it head-on*. In 2.4, he expressed concern that some would "delude [them] with plausible arguments." In 2.8, he warned them "to be on their guard lest they be carried off as spoil" by "spiritual charlatans [who] were trying to ensnare them by their 'philosophy and empty deceit'" (O'Brien, 149).

*Second, he also taught, and elaborated on, substantive doctrine they were to believe.* In 1.15-20, he taught them about the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ.[4] In 2.6–7, he told them to keep walking in the way of Christ, and to sink deep roots to withstand false views. In 2.10, he returned to that theme in light of the human philosophy and empty deceit that were challenging them. In 2.11-12, he stressed that Christ did all that needed to be done for all people, not just the spiritually elite, and that it was done by his death, burial, and resurrection, "not of the flesh," that is, according to the manner and standards of this world. Mysticism that claimed to lift them above the world was not the answer. As 2.13-15 emphasize, Christ was the only mediator; neither principalities and powers nor angels were needed. Finally, 2.16-23 brought all those ideas into play in a devastating criticism of "their false notions and aberrant behavior" (O'Brien, 149).

## *Conclusion*

Paul's approach remains useful for us:

- As we continue to face the challenge to trade God's ways for various human ways and compromises.
- As we consider how much to learn about our world in order to effectively make a defense of our faith (1 Pet 3.15).
- As we increase our depth of understanding of the truths of our faith and wisely apply them to the challenges we face.
- As we answer many and varied falsehoods with the truth.

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## Notes

[1] In this survey, I am mainly following the direction of P. T. O'Brien in sections 4 and 5 of "Colossians, Letter to the," in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, & Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 148-150.

[2] In one sense, that is only to be expected since people usually are trying to make sense of reality with their views and so will often organize various ideas, both familiar and new, so that they can make sense of the whole.

One observation about the Colossian heresy that should be made it that it is doubtful that the heresy was "gnosticism" (or even "proto-gnosticism") since that heresy did not fully develop until much later, but it is likely that there was some more developed "form" to the views Paul discredited.

[3] Clinton E. Arnold, "Study Notes on Colossians," *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 2296.

[4] O'Brien comments, "Paul expounds the doctrine of the cosmic-Christ more fully than in his earlier letters … in Colossians 1:15-20 and 2:13-15" (O'Brien, 150).