

Published in the *Biblical Bulletin* ##67-68, Summer and Fall, 1988

Colossians: Antidote to the Cults

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In learning to recognize counterfeit money, experts say, you should spend most of your time studying genuine money. Modern counterfeiters, unfortunately, often have access to advancing technology and are making it increasingly difficult to distinguish their product from the real thing. But the principle still holds in the spiritual realm, where there is no "paper money" and Satan can't afford to mint in real gold. If we are to recognize false gospels, avoid them ourselves, and warn others, there is really no substitute for a thorough knowledge of the true Gospel.

Already in New Testament times there were plenty of false gospels. True, Satan had not yet had time to produce the variety of counterfeit "christianities" we see today, but he had been busy for centuries developing pagan substitutes for the religion of Noah and the patriarchs. From Greece and Rome through Asia Minor and Syria to Babylon and Egypt, local religions developed. Whenever a local variety became stale and lifeless – perhaps a state religion that benefited only the ruling class – he brought in another version from elsewhere to provide new promises which, too, would eventually prove futile. By New Testament times, most pagan religions featured a bewildering variety of gods and goddesses apparently built up by combining local religions. Exported to other parts of the Greco-Roman world, several of these became "mystery religions," which offered their adherents individual choice in doctrine and worship, the prestige of elite membership and secret initiations, plus promises of health, wealth and protection in this life, and salvation beyond.

Within Judaism, something similar had also happened. Rival sects such as the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes had arisen to obscure the pure religion of the older covenant, adding various mixtures of philosophical, occult, legalistic, ascetic and speculative features to God's original revelation. Among both Jews and pagans, competing teachers gathered disciples around themselves, each advocating his own distinctive doctrines, much like the various gurus today.

Paul's letter to the Colossians is a powerful response to one such "guru" cult, probably a version of Essene Judaism somewhat like the group that copied the Dead Sea Scrolls, but located hundreds of miles to the northwest in central Asia Minor. Paul tells us that this group made converts by persuasive argument (2:4); that they called themselves a "philosophy" (2:8; Josephus' term to describe the various Jesus groups of the time); that they emphasized Jewish dietary and calendar observances (2:16); that they boasted of visions, and either worshiped angels or were interested in how angels worship (2:18); that they had strict rules of separation (2:20-21) and advocated severe treatment of the body (2:23). In God's providence, this group of which Paul wrote had important emphases in common with a wide spectrum of modern cults, so that what Paul said here has many applications today.

Paul's antidote to such cults is, in a word, Christ. To know Him – who He is and what He has done – and to love Him supremely, is sufficient to protect us from every false gospel, no matter how attractive and deceptive it may be. In this article and one to follow, let us see how Paul develops his response in the letter to the Colossians.

Who is Jesus Christ? He is God's beloved Son (1:13), the very image of the invisible God (1:15), in whom all God's fullness takes bodily form (1:19; 2:9). He is the firstborn of all creation (1:15) and firstborn from the dead (1:18), both probably indicating pre-eminence in authority rather than in time, since others were resurrected before Jesus and since Jesus' incarnation (becoming a creature) happens long after the creation of many other beings. In fact, Christ was God's active agent in all God's creative activity (1:16), which could not be if Christ were merely a created being Himself. Indeed, Christ is the goal or purpose of all creation (1:16). He existed before creation and even holds all creation together (1:17).

Not only is Christ the head of creation, but He is also head of His redeemed people, God's new creation (1:18). He is supreme over every other being (1:18), whether heavenly or earthly, visible or invisible, no matter how much power or authority that being might have (1:16; 2:10). What guru or finite god could beat that?

Thus one important antidote to heresy, today as always, is knowing who Christ is. If we take Him as only a great teacher, a great example, or even the greatest human who ever lived, we do not understand biblical Christianity, no matter how much we may admire Jesus. We must see Him as Lord of all or He is not our Lord at all.

Yet if we only know who He is but don't know Him personally, we still have missed the main point. To be orthodox but finally lost is surely one of the greatest tragedies imaginable. We must turn from our sins and seek Him or all our right beliefs are useless after all.

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In a previous issue of the *Biblical Bulletin*, we began our study of Paul's letter to the Colossians as an antidote to the cults. We noted that Paul was apparently responding to a first century Jesus group akin to the Essenes, a group which was simultaneously legalistic, secretive, self-denying and visionary, which had a place for the Messiah or Christ, but merely as a human or possibly an angel. We saw how Paul's teaching on who Jesus is responded to their error and also to the error of most cults today. But not only will a correct view of who Christ is help us, so will a proper understanding of what He has done.

What has Christ done? Paul probably structures his response in terms especially relevant to the claims of this cult at Colosse. At least, the discussion is quite appropriate to an Essene sort of sect, which emphasized circumcision, baptism, resurrection, forgiveness and angelic authorities. As Paul says, Christ has circumcised us supernaturally by His death (2:11), so we don't need physical circumcision. All of our sinful flesh was cut off

with Him at the cross, not just a piece (as in circumcision). In His death and resurrection we have been spiritually baptized, dying to our old life and rising to a new one (2:12). We don't need Essene baptism (nor even Christian water baptism, for that matter) to have newness of life. By dying on the cross, Christ took away our condemnation for breaking God's law (2:14). We don't need to depend on our obedience or on Jewish ritual to receive forgiveness for all our sins (2:13). Finally, Christ has overcome the angelic powers which could harm us (2:15). We don't need special visions, revelations or techniques to avoid them. Paul sums it up by saying that we have been brought to *fullness* or completion in Christ (2:10).

Because of who Christ is and what He has done, we don't need any of the "extras" offered by the cults if we have cast ourselves upon Jesus. We don't need special ceremonies, not even those actually provided by God in the Old Testament. At best, these are only symbols foreshadowing the real thing, Christ (2:16-17). We don't need visions or special insight into how angels worship. A false humility that keeps us from Christ will actually disqualify us for salvation (2:18). More likely, a concentration on real or alleged visions will fill us with pride and disconnect us from the Head, in which alone we can live as parts of His body (2:18-19). We don't need a super-spirituality built on rigorous rules to treat our bodies harshly or to keep us from eating or touching unclean things. All these things will one day be destroyed with this passing world, and such self-discipline never could extinguish our sin nature anyway (2:20-23).

So Paul answers the cultists of his day. And so we too may answer those of our day. If I have Christ, I need nothing else. Without Him, everything else is finally worth nothing.

To some of the particular types of cults of our day, Colossians provides some specific answers as well. To movements which downplay the person and work of Christ (whether theological liberalism, Jehovah's Witnesses or other cults) we may answer: Christ is God. He made everything, He keeps it going, and everything finds its purpose in Him. Christ alone has made reconciliation with the Father; there is no salvation that does not depend on His work only.

To esoteric movements which emphasize mystical illumination, secret teachings, special initiations and an inner circle (like Freemasonry, Mormonism or Scientology) we say: There is no true knowledge of God that does not finally come through Christ and agree with His word, the Bible. All religious experience must be tested against this standard. True knowledge of God and union with Him is an *open* secret!

To movements emphasizing supernatural powers and visions (spiritism and some charismatic groups) we respond: There are spiritual powers out there, all right, but not all of them are good or come from God. Christ has already defeated all the supernatural powers arrayed against us, though their final destruction still lies ahead. What God really want in His people is holiness, not special powers.

To various "super-spiritual" movements (all sorts of legalisms, vegetarianism, monasticism and asceticism) we answer: Christ did it all. These extra rules can earn us

nothing. Such rules do not touch the real problem of our fallen nature anyway. What we really need can only come through Christ – forgiveness, righteousness and a new heavenly life. God has made the family with all its authority structures; don't treat it with contempt.

May each one of us take these teachings from God's word to heart. Let us examine ourselves to see whether or not we have biblical faith. Let us help those around us lest they be led astray from God's truth into one or another of the spiritual counterfeits which are so common today. And let us praise God for His provision of full and complete salvation in Jesus Christ.