

HERESY IN COLOSSE

The Apostolic Approach to Error in a First Century Church

- A Study in Colossians 2 -

The setting is Colosse, a town of diminishing prominence in Asia, located a little inland from Ephesus. It is evident that the church was planted by Epaphras who has briefed Paul on the matter of a particular heresy which is influencing the first century church. It seems that Paul may not have met these believers.

The epistle contains no description of the heresy as such. Rather we are left to piece together an understanding of it's teachings through the response which Paul provides in his letter.

News of the heresy reaches Paul while he is in gaol. Despite this difficult situation the reader can't help but admire the faith of the Apostle and the encouragement he gives to these believers.

There are some questions I would like to consider while exploring this text:

- What was the nature of the heresy?
- Why are people taken in by this type of error?
- Is this part of a general class of weakness that we have as fallen beings?
- Is there an answer to this dilemma?

THE HERESY

This particular heresy seems to be a combination of Gnostic and Jewish ideas which have been syncretised with Christian beliefs.

The reference to Sabbath days and circumcision indicates a Jewish influence.

The influence of Gnostic ideas is more complex. These philosophers often emphasised the need to acquire special knowledge in order to accomplish one's spiritual pursuit. Paul may be responding to this where he emphasises that the knowledge of God is found in Christ (2:2-3) and through his prayer for spiritual wisdom (1:9) for the Colossians.

Gnostics also had difficulty with the idea that the realms of heaven & earth can touch one another. This dualism made the incarnation a particularly troublesome notion for them. The Gnostics sought to account for Christ's deity by saying that it was angelic powers who were ruling the cosmos (2:18). Paul appears to be refuting their ideas by asserting that Christ is both "the first-born of all creation" (1:15) and that "all things have been created by Him" (1:16). He also claims that "In Christ all the fullness of the deity dwells in bodily form" (2:9) and that "in Him all things hold together" (1:17). He is thus affirming that Christ is both man and God and is ruling and sustaining all things. Heaven and earth have indeed met.

The dualistic ideas of the Gnostics were also expressed through their adherence to strict bodily discipline, indicated in the text by "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (2:21) and Paul's judgement on it in 2:22-23. The philosophers hoped that by

doing this they would be able to come closer to the spirit realm. Rather, as the Apostle asserts, we were united with God as a sovereign act when we were dead (2:10-14).

APOSTOLIC EVALUATION

The Apostle is not hesitant in his assessment. His forthright manner should be considered with the fact that these letters were likely to be read in public, when the false teachers themselves may have been present.

Of the teaching, he refers to it as empty deception (2:8); fine-sounding argument (2:4) and not the foolishness of the cross; according to the tradition of men (2:8), rather than based on revelation; according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ (2:8); having the appearance of wisdom (2:23), but not based on Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3); based on a shadow of what is to come, and not the substance which belongs to Christ (2:17); destined to perish (2:22), coming from men and not the life giving Spirit.

Of the teachers, Paul describes them as delighting in self-abasement (2:18); focused on what is seen (2:18), rather than what is received by faith; not holding fast to Christ, who is our Head and causes us to grow (2:19); delighting in false humility (2:23), whereas true humility can only come from confidence in God’s all-sustaining faithfulness (ref Phil 2); having an unspiritual (or fleshly) mind (2:18) rather than having the “spiritual wisdom” referred to in 1:9.

Paul refers to the *effect of this teaching* on the hearers as defrauding them of the prize (2:18) which the Father has qualified us to share in (1:12); leading them into captivity (2:8) by telling them that they need to do more to be qualified as God’s sons.

Rather, and we should note the tense, we *have* been delivered from the domain of darkness (1:13) and he *has* disarmed the rulers and authorities (2:15). Our prize was obtained for us *when we were dead*.

“When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” (2:13-14)

APOSTOLIC WISDOM

The experience of the Apostle has no doubt been drawn on in his dealing with this particular problem among the believers at Colosse.

It is interesting to muse on the wisdom of Paul in dealing with this issue and how this might be headlined. I suggest that, from his past dealings of this type there are five things Paul knows.

1. He has seen it before

The infiltration of heresy into the Colossian church is in character with the assaults Paul has seen before. Notably, it is reminiscent of Galatians:

“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel” (Gal 1:6)

“After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ... Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” (Gal 3:3,5)

The centrepiece of the heresy is that grace is not enough. This error is familiar across the epistles, where the influence of Greek philosophy and Judaistic legalism on the early Church is encountered numerous times. Moreover, the rejection of grace, or attempts to add additional requirements to it, has been a fundamental problem affecting the church throughout its history.

2. It is part of a bigger problem

The commonplace nature of this error (to reject grace) is related to the deepest malaise affecting humanity. Men reject what God has to offer in place of their own spiritual aspirations. This is the very heart of human sinfulness. We desire to ennoble ourselves with a role to play in the highest of pursuits - our salvation. It is a turning from what God offers through faith to a dependency on what we can do; on what is seen, to visible forms of security.

3. He must take care with his approach

With our weakness in clear view, Paul talks first about what God has done and who we are in Christ *before* he discusses what we should do. This basic attack of ‘doctrine first, then application’ is referred to as the Pauline method and is a general pattern noted in his epistles.

Accordingly, in Colossians, the first two chapters repeatedly point us to the greater realities that surround us, while the latter chapter deal more in practical matters and in practical matters.

Profoundly, in 2:9-10:

“For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority”

4. It is not a contest of thought systems

Although the Colossian believers had received good teaching, they had been led astray. This is also the case in the situations described in other epistles, notably Galatians and Hebrews. In Galatians we also find that the Apostle Peter himself was duped.

Before addressing the heresy itself, Paul makes two points of emphasis. First, he declares that it is the gospel which is “bearing fruit and growing” (1:6). It is the Word of God Himself who is active. Secondly, he details his prayer for the believers (1:9–

12), showing his dependence on this active Christ, rather than on his own ability, systems or strategies.

Paul does not view corrective teaching as the final remedy. Rather, the Apostle sees himself as being locked in a spiritual battle, “striving according to [God’s] power, which mightily works within [him]” (1:29). The false teachers have impressive sounding arguments (2:23) yet Paul doesn’t “come with superiority of speech or of wisdom” but “determine[s] to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 1:1-2).

5. God is at work to remedy heresy

The Scriptures discuss in numerous places the manner in which God is at work shaping the believer’s thinking and behaviour. In doctrinal terms this is dealt with under the general heading of sanctification. It is a big topic and I will only try to touch on it with some vital points which apply to the passage we are studying. That is, to articulate the way in which God deals with heresy, and in particular how he deals with the type of heresy we encounter in Colossians 2.

The key issue is that the error takes easy root because of our desire for self-dependency and to satisfy Heaven’s demands through what we have done. People will continue to be lured into this type of error if their weakness to take the bait is not dealt with.

Where is the Apostle’s confidence for this to be accomplished? Although he argues against the heresy, Paul does not rely on argument to win the battle. Rather, his confidence is in God to be at work to bring the Colossians through until the final day. Paul knows that it has less to do with what they know and more to do with what is controlling them. It is a matter of the shaping of the will. This is expressed in his prayer in 1:9-12, a plea for God to grant a spiritual wisdom which will equip and strengthen the believers to live and grow.

The Scriptures testify to how this wisdom is borne from God’s action in the gritty experience of the Christian. God is at work in us through His fatherly discipline, according to Hebrews 12:7. Further, trouble is placed in perspective in that “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret”(2 Cor 7:10).

Paul relates from his own experience:

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” 2 Cor 1:8-9

He then describes the same path of fruit from experience as the lot of all believers:

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to

death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body." 2 Cor 4:7-10

This action of God in us is attested by some of our great Christian forbears. Luther described it as the alien work of God, in which He appears evil when He is doing good, taking us from a dependency on what is seen and into the darkness of faith.

Jonathan Edwards described it thus:

"God's manner is in almost everything to suffer 'em first to be undone and then to build 'em up again in a more glorious state ... than before ... When he has anything very glorious to accomplish, he ... builds it up out of ruins ..., hereby manifesting the glory of his sufficient power"¹

The Spirit is our teacher, leading us into the truth which we cannot bear (John 16:12-13). He is renewing our minds, and may do so by leading us through valleys of death like shadows (Ps 23:4), and to the cross, causing us to take it up and in so doing bringing to perfection the good work he began in us (Phil 1:6).

In short, this heresy is put to death on a cross. The frailty of sin that gives it life is only truly dealt with by crucifixion. The action of the cross on us then brings with it a spiritual wisdom, revealing to us the true manner of things and affection on where our dependency is to lie. This was the answer for the Colossian church and remains the answer for us and for all believers. As the psalmist said, "before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word"².

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Dec 22, 2006

¹ Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 907

² Ps 119:67