

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS AND ITS MESSAGE FOR TODAY

“WHEN I open the chapel door of the Epistle to the Colossians,” said Deissmann, “it is as if Johann Sebastian himself sat at the organ.” Those who are hopelessly ignorant in the realm of music may listen to some great work of Johann Sebastian Bach and discover next to nothing of the master musician’s meaning. When we study an Epistle like Colossians, we feel sometimes that, even after many years of Christian experience, we have done little more than learn the alphabet of the spiritual life, but though there may be things in the Epistle which, even after long and serious thought, remain an unplumbed deep to us, some notes at least of its music may linger in our minds. A casual reading of it might suggest that it deals with matters that are very remote indeed from our modern world, that it is concerned entirely with “old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago”. Nothing could be further from the truth. The amazing thing about the Bible is that it always keeps itself abreast of, nay more, is in advance of, all movements of human thought, and it always has the last word to say on every problem that perplexes and baffles the wisdom that is merely human.

A glory gilds the sacred page,
Majestic like the sun;
It gives a light to every age,
It gives, but borrows none.

The hand that gave it still supplies
The gracious light and heat;
His truths upon the nations rise,
They rise, but never set.

I. THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

It is quite evident that in this Epistle Paul is engaged in refuting some subtle heresy which was threatening to work mischief in the Colossian Church, but what the precise tenets of that heresy were it is not so easy to discover. Attempts have been made to prove that the heresy was of purely Jewish origin

and character, but a careful study of the Epistle as a whole indicates that that does not seem to be the case. There is something here that is far more subtle than the Judaistic perversion of the Gospel of free grace which Paul attacks so mercilessly in his stormy, passionate Galatian Epistle and elsewhere. The Colossian heresy seems to have been a rather weird mixture of Jewish and pagan elements. The Jewish elements are patent enough, in the insistence which, it seems, was laid by the heretical teachers on circumcision (ii. 11) and on certain Jewish festivals (ii. 16) The worship of angels mentioned in ii. 18 was, perhaps, not due to exclusively Jewish inspiration, though it is fact that, in the Judaism of New Testament times, angelology, with its numerous wild speculations, played a very prominent part.

There was more than Judaism in the Colossian heresy. Its exponents claimed to be in possession of a high-flown philosophy which far transcended plain and simple Christianity, and gave its devotees a position of fancied superiority over the common herd of believers. It was a philosophy which, while it laid claim sometimes to a spurious humility, really puffed up those who accepted it with spiritual pride, pride fostered by supposed visions of the world which lies behind all physical phenomena, the dupes taking their stand on what they had seen, forsooth, of these hidden mysteries (ii. 18). How mistaken those high-brow philosophers were! In his first explicit reference to them, though he has them in view right from the outset of the Epistle, Paul declares roundly that, with all their pretentious philosophical jargon, they were like children spelling out an ABC lesson in the school of truth, whereas in Christ are to be found "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge".

Paul believes that the Colossians have not been stampeded into disorderly flight by the attacks of the heretics. He is delighted to hear of their orderly array and their solid front, inspired by their faith in Christ. Let them cultivate closer communion with Christ. "As you received, at your conversion, the Christ, even Jesus the Lord, go on walking in Him, where you are safe from all alien influences, having the roots of your being firmly planted in Him. . . . Take care that no one makes spoil of you, leading you away into captivity, by means of philosophy and empty deceit, or, as Moule paraphrases, through his empty deceit of a philosophy, according to human traditions and the world's crude notions, and not according to Christ. For it is in Christ

that all the fullness of the Godhead has its lasting abode, bodily-wise—so that matter cannot be radically evil—and you are in Him, filled full in Him who is the Head of all principality and power” (ii. 5–10). “All the personal powers of the unseen, however real and glorious,” says Moule, “are but limbs (in their order of being) of this Head; therefore no nearer to Him than you are, and no less dependent on Him. Live then on the Fountain, not on its streams; use to the full the fullness which in Christ *is* yours.”

The philosophy, or the theosophy as it has sometimes been called, which is thus scathingly revealed in its emptiness and its utter insufficiency, has been regarded, with considerable reason, as a rudimentary form of the Gnosticism which worked such havoc in the Church of the second century. The Gnostics in the Church of the second century pretended to be in possession of a deeper Gnosis, a deeper knowledge, than the ordinary believer, as they had pondered more deeply the mysteries of existence. This Gnostic heresy is, ultimately, of heathen origin, containing elements derived from Persian and Babylonian thought, and it is, almost certainly, older than Christianity. In the second century it became a serious problem to the Church, as we learn in the pages of Irenaeus and other early Church writers, but in the first century, at Colossae and elsewhere, its pernicious tenets had begun to infiltrate into the Church, for, as it has been put, “there can be little doubt that the wave which culminated in the great Gnostic system had been long in gathering”.

The heretics of Colossae, it would appear, taught that idea which was so prominent in Gnosticism and which is so persistent a postulate of Eastern thought, the idea of the essential evil of matter; hence, they sometimes called their followers to a rigid asceticism, a severe and drastic treatment of the body. They had their rigid ascetic rules, “Touch not, taste not, handle not” (ii. 21–3). Sometimes, on the other hand, the heresy went to the other extreme, and proclaimed that it was a matter of indifference how the body acted, so long as the soul dwelt in its airy region of transcendental thought: the soul, with its essential superiority to matter, could never be defiled by anything that the body might do. Paul, no doubt, refers to “advanced thinkers” of this type in 2 Tim. ii. 16, where he says that “they will advance to more and more of impiety,” and, as he goes on to say, “their

word will eat yet further in, like a gangrene," creeping secretly and insidiously, from limb to limb of the moral and spiritual being.

Because matter was essentially evil, there could be no immediate contact between the holy God and matter. So the heretical teachers postulated a series of emanations from the divine Being, aeons, spirits, angels that intervened between God and matter. The theory was that one aeon came from God, another aeon from this aeon, and so on, till, as Dr. A. T. Robertson puts it, "there was one far enough away from God for God not to be contaminated by the creation of evil matter and yet close enough to have power to do the work". This fantastic speculation Paul brushed ruthlessly aside, as we have seen already and as we shall see again presently, by stating with crystal clearness the doctrine of Christ as True God and True Man, the one solitary Mediator between God and man, between God and the Universe.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE FIRST CHAPTER

A brief statement of the main ideas in the first chapter of the Epistle, with its great Christological passage, may be helpful. The principal fact to note is that Paul's one purpose is to make his readers see Christ more clearly, so that they may be inspired to seek and possess and enjoy more fully their spiritual endowments in Him. The best way to refute error is, not to rest content with the easy and usually futile method of wild denunciation, but to state with the utmost clearness the positive and eternal truth of God.

After the opening salutation, Paul gives thanks for the faith of these Colossians he had never seen and for the love which they had manifested towards their fellow-Christians, faith and love which ought to be continually deepened and strengthened by the hope that was stored up for them in heaven and awaited fulfilment there. Paul prays that, in order to be on their guard against the subtle teaching of the heretics, they may have the deepest possible insight into the will of God, in order to please God in everything, as His saints should do. He longs to see them fruitful in every good work, ever increasing by the knowledge of God, for the right way to counteract the activities of those who claim to possess a deeper knowledge than ordinary believers possess is, not to become obscurantists, but to concentrate on the true knowledge and to strive to enter into all its

implications. Paul reminds his readers that, to help them to live this life of ever-increasing knowledge and consequent fruitfulness, they can draw on the strength which comes to them in the forces which flow from God's self-revelation in His Son, the reception of this power resulting in a life of patient endurance and long-suffering, full of joy and thanksgiving inspired by the fact that the Father of their Lord had qualified them, in Him, to enter into possession of their share in the spiritual Canaan, the true homeland of the soul, in the realm of light. The Father had indeed rescued them from the authority of the realm of darkness and had transferred them, by a blessed spiritual migration, into the Kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom they have the redemption which brings to us as its supreme blessing the forgiveness of sins.

In view of the dangerous heresies which were being taught among them, Paul then summons his readers to consider, with bowed heads and hushed hearts, the supra-mundane glory and majesty of Christ. He is the Image of the unseen God, the Firstborn of the whole creation, born eternally of the Father, and therefore, as Moule puts it, standing to the whole creation "in the relation of priority of existence and supremacy of inherited right." In Him as the ground of all being, all things in heaven and earth were created, and not least these angelic hosts of which the Colossian heretics were making so much. All things were created, and now exist before our eyes, through Him and for Him, because, as Lightfoot says, he is "the final cause as well as the creative agent of the Universe . . . the goal of the Universe, as He was the starting-point". He is before all things, and in Him all things cohere. "He is the principle of cohesion in the Universe," to quote Lightfoot again. "He impresses upon creation that unity and solidarity which make it a cosmos instead of a chaos." And, to come to still deeper things, He is the Head of the Body, the Church, the vast company of the redeemed, who have been "called out" of the fallen, doomed world into vital, organic union with Him, who is the Beginning, the Origin, the Principle and Secret, of the life of that Body, and that because He is the Firstborn from the dead, in order that in all things He might take the first place; for it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness, all the Plenitude, of the Divine power and grace should take up its lasting abode.

He, thus equipped, has made peace by the blood of His

Cross, and His purpose is to present perfect before the Throne at last every one of His redeemed. Let the Colossians, therefore, abide in the faith that centres in this glorious Redeemer, and let them not be moved away from the hope which comes to them in the Gospel which was preached, not to a little coterie of deep-browed philosophers, but to every creature which is under heaven. Of that Gospel Paul was made a minister. I follow here, more or less, Moffatt's translation. "I am suffering now on your behalf, but I rejoice in that; I would make up the full sum of all that Christ has to suffer in my person on behalf of the Church, His Body; for I am a minister of the Church by the divine commission which has been granted me in your interests, to make a full presentation of God's message—of that open secret which, though concealed from ages and generations of old, has now been disclosed to the saints of God. It is His will that they should understand the glorious wealth which this secret holds for the Gentiles, in the fact of Christ's presence in you as the hope of glory. This is the Christ we proclaim; we train everyman and teach everyman the full scope of this knowledge, in order to set everyman before God mature in Christ" (i. 24-8). It is not just a few philosophers, but *everyone* of the redeemed who can attain to such maturity of character.

III. THE ANTIDOTE TO ALL ERROR

Paul's one remedy for all false teaching is Christ, a clearer vision of the cosmic Christ, a deeper and fuller knowledge of the cosmic Christ. In Christ are "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, in a hidden manner". That means that we do not need any teaching, so to speak, to supplement Christ: we do not need to go outside Christ for anything; all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and not merely some of them, are *in* Him. But, they are in Him *in a hidden manner*: they do not lie on the surface, so that we must unceasingly pursue our researches in the inexhaustible mine, in order that the truth of God may become increasingly ours. The divine antidote for all poisonous heresy still remains the same. The one crucial test by which Spiritism and Christian Science and many another modern cult must be tested is this: "What place does it give to Christ?" Does it, to use Paul's phrase, hold fast the Head (ii. 19)? Does it say, with the whole redeemed Church of God,

Jesus takes the highest station,
O what bliss the sight affords?

IV. CHRIST AND THE UNIVERSE

The Colossians were being troubled by bewildering speculations regarding the origin of the Universe. Let them seek a fuller knowledge of Him who is the world's Creator and Upholder, as He is the world's Redeemer. Paul, taught of the Spirit of Truth, sees more deeply into "The Riddle of the Universe" than any of the pundits of the British Association have ever seen. The philosophy that is merely human can never see very far into the secrets of Nature. As Moule says: "Natural philosophy, after all observation and classification of phenomena and their processes, asks necessarily but in vain (so long as it asks only 'Nature'), what is their ultimate secret, what *is*, for instance, the last reason of universal gravitation. Revelation discloses that reason in the Person and Will of the Son of God." It is the scientist who sits at the feet of Christ who is likely to see most deeply into the mysteries of Nature. That is why, as Wade Robinson sings,

Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen.

That is why William Cowper could say:

One Spirit, His
Who wore the platted thorn with bleeding brows,
Rules universal Nature. Not a flower
But shows some touch, in freckle, streak, or stain,
Of His unrivalled pencil. He inspires
Their balmy odours, and imparts their hues,
And bathes their eyes with nectar, and includes
In grains as countless as the seaside sands,
The forms with which He sprinkles all the earth.
Happy who walks with Him! whom what he finds
Of flavour or of scent in fruit or flower,
Or what he views of beautiful or grand . . .
Prompts with remembrance of a present God.

All that suggests a far grander conception of the Universe than the conception which regards it a dead, soulless Machine, without guiding hand or animating heart.

V. THE ATONING AND RECONCILING CROSS

The Christ whom Paul proclaims is the Christ of the atoning and reconciling Cross. That Cross has a cosmic significance, for,

according to Paul, it has meant, somehow or other, the reconciling of things in heaven as well as things on earth (i. 20). Dr. Dykes Shaw says, in his excellent treatise on *The Pauline Epistles*: "The whole creation that has so long travailed and been in pain, shall be blest in this *Pax Dei*, and even the angelic beings—may we not conceive it?—dismayed by the awful prevalence and dominion of sin, and bewildered by the divine attitudes and movements towards it, by the long-suffering of God and the condescension of divine self-sacrifice, shall be drawn in a blessed access of rapturous adoration nearer to the God of redeeming love, and at last understanding what they long desired to look into, shall praise Him through infinity in the Song of the Lamb." The angels of heaven do not need the Atonement which sinners of mankind need, and, as Paul says, the Gospel of Atonement is preached to every creature which is *under* heaven, but in some such way as has been indicated, the Atonement accomplished in the Cross may have drawn those angels nearer to God.

For sinners of mankind the Cross means forgiveness and the cancelling of the bond, written in ordinances, which was against them. The bond we may, perhaps, regard as the bond of the holy law of God, with its righteous requirements. Man's assent, however feeble, to those righteous requirements, the assent of his conscience, was his signature to the bond, and he thus acknowledged, however imperfectly, that the bond was *against* him, was his stern enemy, blocking the way between him and the holy God. Christ fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the holy and inexorable law of God, and, as Paul puts it, He has thus nailed the bond to His Cross, displaying it to all the Universe as completely and for ever cancelled. Weymouth's translation of verses 13 to 15 of the second chapter perhaps brings out with sufficient clearness Paul's meaning in that difficult passage. "And to you—dead as you were in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your natural state—He has nevertheless given Life with Himself, having forgiven us all our transgressions. The bond, with its requirements, which was in force against us and was hostile to us, He cancelled, and cleared it out of the way, nailing it to His Cross. And the hostile princes and rulers He shook off from Himself, and boldly displayed them as His conquests, when by the Cross He triumphed over them."

That specially difficult last verse, which has had so many conflicting interpretations assigned to it, seems to bear, more or less, the meaning which Weymouth gives to it. "The hostile princes and rulers He shook off from Himself, and boldly displayed them as His conquests, when by the Cross He triumphed over them." "The paradox of the crucifixion," says Lightfoot, "is thus placed in the strongest light—triumph in helplessness and glory in shame. The convict's gibbet is the victor's car." Those who are in vital union with Christ by faith have nothing to fear from the principalities and powers of evil, for the powers of evil have sustained at His hands an overwhelming defeat. The children of God, too, can become "more than conquerors, through Him who loved them".

VI. THE HERESY REFUTED ON ITS PRACTICAL SIDE

Some of the Colossians may have been in danger of slipping back into the observance of Jewish ceremonial. Here again, the corrective to any such retrograde tendency is Christ. "Let no one take you to task in eating and drinking, or with regard to a feast day, a new moon or a sabbath. These things are shadows of the things to come, but the Fulfilment, the shadow-casting Substance, is Christ's", because it consists of Him in His redeeming work (ii. 16, 17). His atoning sacrifice and all the spiritual privileges bestowed by Him are the reality to which the old institutions pointed. Why remain in the shadow when the reality is here, when the sun has risen?

Some of the heretical teachers were advocating ascetic practices. Paul argues that the best way to conquer the flesh is for the believer to possess his possessions in the risen, ascended and reigning Christ. I follow the main lines of Weymouth's translation of the last four verses of the second chapter. "If you have died with Christ and have escaped from the world's rudimentary notions, why, as though your life still belonged to the world, do you submit to such precepts as 'Do not handle this;' 'Do not taste that;' 'Do not touch that other thing'—referring to things which are all intended to be used up and perish—in obedience to mere human injunctions and teachings? These rules have indeed an appearance of wisdom where self-imposed worship exists, and an affectation of humility and unsparing treatment of the body, but they are not of any value against the

indulgence of the flesh." Paul then goes on to indicate the only way in which true holiness can ever be attained. "If then you were raised with Christ—as indeed you were, in the moment of your spiritual new birth—go on seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. . . . Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth, sexual vice, impurity, sensual passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. It is on account of these things that the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience, and you also at one time walked in them, when you lived in them" (ii. 20-iii. 7).

This call to holiness is Paul's answer to any Antinomian tendency that there may have been in the Colossian heresy. He proceeds to make that call very searching, coming down to very searching particulars. "Strip off, like filthy clothes, all these evil things, dull, settled anger and every passionate outburst of wrath, ill-will, evil-speaking, foul-mouthed abuse. Lie not one to another, seeing you have stripped off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man, which is being renewed unto knowledge, so as to become like Him who created it. . . . You, therefore, who are God's chosen holy people, on whom He has set His love, put on, as the beautiful garments of the renewed soul, a heart of compassion, kindness, lowliness of mind, meekness, long-suffering; bearing with one another and freely forgiving one another, if any one has a grievance against any one: just as the Lord freely forgave you, so you also must forgive. And over all these, as the girdle or belt, perhaps, which keeps all the other garments in place and as that which is ever there for the world to see, put on love, which is the bond of perfectness," or, as Moffatt has it, "the link of the perfect life," that is, as Moule interprets, "the bond, or tie, which makes and secures the '*perfectness*', wholeness, fullness, harmony, of the Christian character, both in the individual and in society" (iii. 8-15).

How beautifully are doctrine and practice brought here, as in all the Pauline Epistles, into a perfect blend! Sound doctrine is a worthless thing without a holy life, and morality a withering and dying thing unless it has its roots deep down in sound doctrine. And, in the passage which I have been quoting, there are some words which I have omitted, words which bring us back again to one of the master thoughts of the Epistle. In the new creation, says Paul, there cannot be, there is no room for Greek or Jew, circumcision or uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond or

free, but Christ is everything and is in all (iii. 11). The treasures of wisdom and knowledge which are in Christ are not meant for a few select spirits here and there, for a select group of subtle philosophers: they can be possessed and enjoyed by the barbarian tribes of the earth, even by the Scythians, who were regarded as the lowest in the scale of humanity, the most savage of the barbarians.

If they read with child-like awe,
Diviner truths than Plato saw,
Adoring peasants on their knees discern,
While secrets which were veiled of yore,
And angels study more and more,
The infant scholars of the Spirit learn.

Therefore, Paul says, "Let the Word of the Christ take up its abode in you, with all its wealth of wisdom" (iii. 16), "not with a scanty foothold," as Eadie says, "but with a large and liberal occupancy." Only appreciate that wisdom at its true value and the spurious attractiveness of the teaching which has for a time dazzled you will be seen to possess only the false glitter of the most trashy of trinkets in comparison with the pure gold of heaven.

ALEXANDER ROSS.

*Free Church College,
Edinburgh.*