

The Colossian Heresy

Introduction

In the book of Colossians, Paul deals with a "heresy" which had infected the church. Essentially, this heresy was Jewish. That is obvious when one examines the legal ordinances, circumcision, food regulations, sabbath, new moons and other "events" of the Jewish calendar. Although it was Jewish in nature, it was not the same as the straightforward form of Judaism that Paul dealt with in the book of Galatians. These doctrinal errors grew out of a mixture of Judaistic teaching, combined with the whims of oriental and philosophic speculation.

Gnosticism

"Gnosticism was a heresy far more subtle and dangerous than any that had appeared during the early years of the church. It became so widespread that by the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. most of the intellectual Christian congregations throughout the Roman empire were to some degree infected by it. . . It is not easy to give a proper and complete account of this potent anti-Christian influence, for Gnosticism was not a homogeneous system of either religion or philosophy, but embraced many widely diversified sects holding opinions drawn from a great variety of sources" (A. M. Renwick, ISBE, p. 484).

Gnostic comes from the Greek word *gnosis* which means knowledge. The Gnostics were the *knowers*, the *intellectual* ones.

Gnostics taught that matter was essentially evil and that the creating God was not the true God. They considered Jesus as only one of the many intermediaries between God and man. Some of them even denied that Jesus came in the flesh (1 John 2:23; 4:2-3; 2 John 7). They frequently denied that He died on the cross (1 John 5:6-8).

According to the Gnostics, the way to God was barred by a series of emanations. Getting past these emanations to the true God was through knowledge and a series of passwords which only the Gnostics could supply. This meant that salvation was limited to only a few intellectuals (or pseudo-intellectuals). The Gnostics claimed to be the elite, the wise, the philosophers, to whom was revealed a secret knowledge which the overwhelming mass of mankind could never know. The intellectual pride of the Gnostics would have changed the gospel into a philosophy of which only a select intellectual few could be a part.

The series of emanations (or aeons or angels) in their totality were called the Pleroma (fulness). In most Gnostic systems the Pleroma consisted of 30 beings ranging from the highest God at one end to Sophia (wisdom) at the other end (F. Jenkins, *The Theme of the Bible*, p. 44). In this way, the gulf is bridged between God and mankind (see chart). The highest aeons approximate closely to the divine nature, they were the most spiritual and free from matter. These form the highest hierarchy of angels, and these with many other grades of angelic hosts are to be worshiped.

The Epistle to the Colossians reveals the existence of ascetic practices taught by the false teachers (2:21-23). These ascetic practices became very common among Gnostics. "Those who favored unnatural asceticism often fell into the opposite sin of shocking licentiousness. As body and soul are entirely distinct in their nature, the soul cannot be defiled by anything, however carnal and gross, that the body can do. Let the soul go its way on the wings of spiritual thought, and the body indulge its fleshly desires (Renwyck 487)." Observe the many allusions to the Gnostic problem: 1 Corinthians 8:1, 7-11; 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 3:2-6; Titus 1:16; 2 Peter 2:12-18; Jude 4, 8, 11, 19.

Gnosticism is nowhere more clearly or emphatically condemned than in 1 John. Look at 1 John 4:6; 4:1; 2:22; 2 John 7. John's response was in 1 John 5:20; 2:7-11, 29; 3:10. Gnosticism was distinguished by an unethical, loveless intellectualism. John vividly described this dry knowledge which had no love or pity. Because the ethical standards of many Gnostics were low, John emphasized the reality of the incarnation and the high ethical standard of the earthly life of Christ. In Gnosticism knowledge was the supreme end and purpose of life, but Gnostics were left in a loveless state.

Summary of the Colossian Heresy

by Robert H. Gundry

- A. ***Detracted from the person of Christ.*** Paul stresses the preeminence of Christ (Colossians 1:15-19).
- B. ***Emphasized human philosophy.*** Paul showed that it was empty speculation apart from Divine revelation (Colossians 2:8).
- C. ***Contained elements of Judaism,*** such as circumcision (Colossians 2:11; 3:11); rabbinical tradition (Colossians 2:8); dietary regulations

and Sabbath and festival observances (Colossians 2:16). Paul's response is in the verses cited.

- D. ***Included angel worship.*** Angels were considered as intermediaries to keep the highest God (pure Spirit) unsullied by contact with the physical universe (Colossians 2:18). This was a pagan feature. The Jews did not worship angels, nor did they regard the physical universe as evil.
- E. ***The errorists flaunted an exclusivistic air of secrecy and superiority.*** In response, Paul stressed the all-inclusiveness and public nature of the gospel (Colossians 1:20, 23, 28; 3:11).
- F. ***Summary:*** The Colossian heresy blended several elements.
1. Jewish legalism (Point C).
 2. Greek philosophic speculation (Points A, B and E).
 3. Oriental mysticism (Points A and D).