

## Colossians: Christ the Head of the Church

By Steve Ray

Pick your god. They are all worshiped here. Choose your favorite from the pantheon. Greek gods, Roman gods, Hittite and Eastern gods and even the Jewish God. Temples abound. Enter and worship the Ephesian Artemis, the Egyptian Isis or Serapis. Bow down to Zeus, Athena, or a fertility goddesses. Purchase an idol to enshrine in your home. Even enter a synagogue, after getting circumcised of course, and worship JHWH with the Jews. There's surely a god for your liking-isn't it grand!

Your robes are dusty and your sandals are worn. You have entered an ancient city in the land of the Hittites, governed by Rome and with a mixed population of Greeks, Romans, Jews, and a smattering of others—Asia Minor (known today as Turkey). You have traveled about 100 miles inland from the great city of Ephesus and the gates open as you walk into the 5000-year-old city of Colossae.

In the agora, or town square, a man is shouting from the speaker's platform (bema), and everyone is shouting back. He is preaching about a god you've never heard of before. It appears the Colossians aren't pleased to hear about this god. The speaker's name is Epaphras and he's a native of Colossae (Col 4:12). He is preaching about a man as though he were God and a God as though he were a man. It is very confusing-especially with all the shouting.

So you linger as the crowd wanders off. A group gathers around Epaphras and you are invited to his home to clean up and share a meal. You readily agree. You are hungry hungry from your travel, hungry also to learn. By the end of the evening you believe in this man's God and Jesus, this God's son. You are baptized in water, and welcomed into the group—a group they called an ekklesia (church). Epaphras has learned this good news from a Jewish scholar named Paul who is living in Ephesus. Through Paul all of Asia is hearing about Jesus (Acts 19:10–11) and many are astounded by his words and the miracles he performs in the name of this Jesus. Paul had never visited Colossae and never would (2:1), but his influence in Asia Minor, and in Colossae, was profound.

Over time you learn and mature in this new faith called Christianity, and you're eventually ordained a presbyter or priest in the church. But life is not easy and struggles ensue, especially with other religions and philosophies—foreign to Christianity—trying to infiltrate and pollute the true teaching. Epaphras decides upon a journey to consult with Paul, now a prisoner in Rome. After months away Epaphras returns clutching a letter carefully rolled and already worn from repeated readings. And clutch it carefully he should, for the treasure in his hand is the Letter of St. Paul to the Colossians!

Paul was wise; he had studied, seen, and experienced much. He understood the world's religions, and no one understood Judaism better. The “Colossian Heresy” raising its ugly head had two faces: one a Jewish and the other a Gnostic. We have already investigated the Judaizers and their legalistic approach to salvation, but Gnostic? What is Gnosticism?

Put on your thinking caps. The Gnostics (from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge”) claimed that matter was evil and spirit was good—and, one had to receive a special knowledge (*gnosis*) to be saved. A good God (spirit) could not create matter (earthly, physical stuff) so obviously, the Jewish and Christian God could never fit the Gnostic philosophy. The Jewish and Christian God was a spirit, yet he created matter—the heavens and earth (1:16; cp. Gen 1:1–2).

Paul gets right to the point. These Gnostics preached a special *gnosis* or knowledge, but Paul confirmed what the Colossians already knew—Christians had the *epignosis*, the full knowledge of God. And, this full knowledge resided in Jesus. Paul speaks of our “being renewed in knowledge (*epignosis*) after the image of its creator. . . . Christ is all, and in all.” In Christ we don’t have only a *gnosis* preached by the pagans, says Paul, but the *epignosis*, the full knowledge of God. What a slap in the face!

Understanding the culture into which this epistle was written, gives us insight into Paul’s message and the words he uses. The mystery religions and Gnosticism claimed to search the “mysteries” and possess the “fullness” (*pleroma*). But again, Paul uses their own technical terms to confound the heretics and demonstrate to the Christians that what they have is vastly superior to the pagans. *Pleroma* referred to the totality of the various spiritual levels and the beings or entities presumed to live there. Nonsense, says Paul, the “fulness”, the *pleroma*, resides in Christ “for in him all the fulness (*pleroma*) of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:19) and this “whole fulness of deity dwells bodily” in Christ, not far off in some Gnostic myth. To top that, the Christians “have come to ‘fulness’ of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority” (Col 2:9 10).

Paul undercuts the heresies by proclaiming the true mysteries—mysteries that have been revealed in Christ. The mystery religions have nothing on the Christians. Paul uses the word “mystery” four times in Colossians. The Gnostics claimed an exclusive, private revelation only for the initiated, but Paul writes, “I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:25 27).

A true Christology is the final answer to every heresy that ever has been, or ever will be. Knowing Christ truly is the answer because ours is the true religion. It has “all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge (*epignosis*) of God’s mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (*gnosis*)” (2:2 3). Rest assured, dear Colossians, that we have the full knowledge, an *epignosis* superior to the *gnosis* of the Gnostics. Rest assured in the fulness of the Catholic faith! Paul destroyed the Jewish and Gnostic heresies before they were even mentioned in the epistle-true Christology will do that!

Many sects today reject the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ. Jehovah’s Witnesses have resurrected old heresies reducing Jesus Christ to a creature. They show their biblical

ignorance by using Paul's reference to Jesus as "the first-born of all creation" (Col 1:15) to claim he was the first creature to be created. However, this is referring to the Jewish practice of a son inheriting supremacy and authority over the estate. This son was often not the first in order of birth (e.g., Isaac, Jacob). Firstborn referred not to birth, but to an office. Jesus is not created, but having himself created everything, he holds the office, the position of supremacy over all creation.

Colossians contains some of Scripture's strongest claims for the divinity of Christ. "He is the image of the invisible God. . . . in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:15, 19), and in Christ "the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). Paul uses different words to reveal the same mystery as John does in his gospel: "the Word was God. . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:1, 14). Jesus is divine, uncreated—God in the flesh. Again, understanding Christ correctly is the remedy for the evils of heresy.

Would you like to discover and sing an ancient Christian hymn—one sung by the Christians in the first century? You can! Paul exhorts the Colossian believers to "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16). As in Philippians, we can detect an ancient hymn Paul inserted into the letter to the Colossians. In the time of Paul, hymns were bulging with rich theology and were used to teach the faithful. The kids sang, and thus memorized important doctrine! You can uncover such a hymn by reading Colossians 1:15–20. Did Paul write this ancient hymn or did he insert an existing hymn? We don't know. But we know that he rejoiced in prison . . .

. . . and Colossians was written from prison. While incarcerated Paul wrote Colossians between AD 61–63 in Rome, along with Philippians, Philemon, and Ephesians. Ephesians and Colossians are like twin sisters: they look very much alike but are also uniquely different. Seventy-eight verses out of a combined 155 verses contain the same phrases. Colossians emphasizes Christ the head—Christ in all; Ephesians emphasizes Christ the body—all in Christ. Both start with theology and end with practical advice. They both show Paul at his most brilliant.

Epaphras saw the face of Paul on behalf of his beloved Colossians, and the surrounding cities. He was the first to bring the gospel to this region of Asia Minor (Col 1:7) and he remained the faithful stalwart of the church. He knew suffering and as Paul had written, he was suffering on their behalf "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col 1:24). He was struggling on behalf of the church to keep it pure and fully assured. On the ship and over land, Epaphras clutched the letter which contained a promise and a warning for the Colossians assaulted with encroaching heresy: "He has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that [if] you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard" (Col 1:22–23). The little word "if" is a very big word. As he had brought the good news to Colossae many years earlier, Epaphras now brings confirmation of gospel back from Rome (Col 4:12–13) and you, now a long-time Colossian believer, are confirmed and stabilized in

the faith.