

Dear Friends,

Colossians confronts an insidious error which, at the time of Paul's writing, was just beginning its attempt to invade the Christian faith, gnosticism, a mystical religion in its early beginning. As gnosticism developed, it denied the creation, holding that anything material is inherently evil. On that premise, it rejected the Incarnation, God becoming a man in the person of the Lord Jesus. Thus it also rejected that Jesus was truly God, much less God Incarnate.

If the Colossians accepted these ideas, along with many other similar errors of ancient gnosticism, they could not regard Jesus as all the fullness of God in human flesh, indeed all meaningful fullness at all.

In Colossians, Paul wisely confronts this early manifestation of error directly. He also took advantage of the error to write the glowing contrast of God's amazing revelation of Jesus as God in human flesh with glory and fulness. It would be difficult to imagine more powerful and glorious words of description and praise to Jesus in human language than we find in Colossians. Our task in reading and studying Colossians should be therefore twofold. 1) We should discern the character of the errors that Paul exposed and refuted. 2) We should carefully study the glories of our Lord Jesus as Paul described and praised Him in Colossians.

At this season of the year, people across the globe celebrate the birth of Jesus, of God in human flesh, in whatever ways they consider appropriate. I offer a passage that few people will ponder in conjunction with Jesus' birth, but it is central to our study of Colossians.

***And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.*** (Hebrews 1:6 KJV)

We can't imagine the amazing and glorious sound those shepherds must have heard. When we gather for fellowship and worship in our local assemblies, we join with angels in glory still singing the praises of our God and Savior. (Hebrews 12:22-24 KJV) Not only do we worship in the presence of angels, but Paul in this lesson reminds us, we also worship in the presence of our risen, victorious, and glorified Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. If we truly learn the meaning of this lesson, we shall never again take our worship or our time together for granted. Treasure every moment, every hymn you sing, every prayer you pray and hear, and every word of instruction and praise. We have been blessed with a precious spiritual treasure. Lord help us with tender hearts for Him not to take it lightly or ever be willing to forsake it.

Lord bless,  
Joe Holder

## **Colossians**

*Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell. (Colossians 1:15-19 KJV 1900)*

Given that Paul refers to hearing of the faith of the Colossians, (Colossians 1:4-9) it is likely that he had not visited this church at the time of writing this letter. However, he had a

close relationship with Epaphras who was the likely founder and pastor of this church. Commentaries generally hold that Paul wrote Colossians during one of his house arrest seasons. (Acts 24:3, 27 in Caesarea, or Acts 28:30-31 in Rome) Colosse was located inland from Ephesus near Laodicea in the Lycus Valley. The area was not a cultural or commercial hub like Corinth or Ephesus. It was more agricultural.

Why did Paul write Colossians? Two compelling concerns seem to lie at the heart of Paul's letter to this church.

1. The church consisted primarily of Gentile believers. (Colossians 2:13 KJV) Prior to their conversion, they were almost certainly involved in pagan worship. Paul seems concerned that they might revert to that way of life. (Colossians 3:5-11 KJV) Old habits always linger in our minds. When difficulties press on us, we are liable to slip back to the old and familiar ways of thinking and acting. I dearly love Paul's analogy in Colossians 3 of comparing lifestyle and thinking with a wardrobe. We regularly "Put off" one set of clothes and "Put on" another. He teaches the Colossians and us to actively and deliberately "Put off" our old sinful ways of thinking and acting, and to "Put on" the "Wardrobe" of godliness in the example of Jesus.

2. False teachers have gained a hearing in the Colossian Church, and Paul confronts their errors and redirects the Colossians to Jesus and the gospel. We may identify at least two major facets of the error taught by the false teachers.

First, (Colossians 2:16 KJV) the false teachers advocated elements of Judaism, which appear in Paul's warning against being entangled with diet and Sabbath keeping. Second, (Colossians 2:20-23 KJV) errors which were enticing the Colossians involved a severe ascetic lifestyle that suggests an early form of gnosticism. In Colossians 2:18-19, Paul warns against self-focused "will worship" and

angel worship, along with strong flavors of mysticism, "...intruding into those things which he hath not seen." In Colossians 2:21-22, Paul warns against being impressed and deceived by the gnostic avoidance and rejection of all things material.

At this early date, the gnostic attempts to invade Christianity which we see in John's letters (1, 2, and 3 John. I am inclined to believe this same error explains why John's gospel is so different from the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Naïve or unstable believers are often enamored by a new or different idea that suggests that the new idea is necessary for them to be "Really good informed" believers, when, in fact, they are as derailed from their godly faith by these ideas as the Colossians. Whatever anyone teaches that involves any form of Jesus plus something else—anything else—Paul regarded as unacceptable and to be rejected by faithful believers.

Frequently, ideas or causes that have nothing to do with sound godly faith attempt to "Piggy-back" onto the faith and thereby gain credibility which they otherwise could not attain.

How did Paul confront these errors? How should we confront and reject the endless parade of "Jesus plus" ideas that regularly attempt similar efforts to gain undeserved credibility by attaching themselves to Christian faith?

First, Paul briefly and clearly identified the errors, leaving no doubt that he regarded them as grave departures from the faith of Jesus and the godly "Business" of a faithful church or believer. Secondly, he repeatedly holds up Jesus to the Colossians and us as God's complete answer for all legitimate spiritual problems or needs we may face. All the "Jesus plus" ideas of our day—or of Christian history—imply by their "Plus" ideas that they do not believe Jesus alone did enough to save, or does enough to satisfy our daily needs. Paul refused such

devaluing of Jesus. Let's examine our study verses to see the healthy pattern of his teaching.

*Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature.* God is, by His nature, invisible. Jesus reminded the Samaritan woman, "God is a Spirit." A spirit is not material or visible, unless, as with God, He chooses to reveal Himself; when He does so, He reveals Himself in the Person of Jesus. Later in Colossians, Paul will confirm this point, "**For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.**" (Colossians 2:9 KJV) Do not miss that Paul used the present tense, "**dwelleth**," not a past tense verb. Paul wrote Colossians as much as twenty-five to thirty years after Jesus ascended, but He bore the bodily image of God no less than in His Incarnation.

*...the firstborn of every creature.* Those who reject the full godhood of Jesus will twist this phrase to imply their errant belief that Jesus, the eternal Word of God, was created, but He is the supreme of God's created beings. "*Firstborn*" is used in Scripture to identify one who is supreme over others, not one in a line of others. "**Also I will make him my firstborn, Higher than the kings of the earth.**" (Psalm 89:27 KJV 1900) God magnified David above other rulers of his day, not a competitor with them for that position. His appointment of David was unique. God didn't consider any other ruler in David's time.

The title "firstborn" is applied to Christ (Lk 2:7; Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; Rv 1:5). It stresses Christ's preeminence over all because he was the first to rise from the dead. As firstborn, Christ is heir of all things (Heb 1:2) and the head of the church (Eph 1:20–23; Col 1:18, 24; Heb 2:10–12). (Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, Tyndale Bible Dictionary, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 486)

In all these references to Jesus as God's "Firstborn," the intent is to identify Him exclusively as God's preeminent and only

Son, not the highest of many sons. For example, 1 Timothy 6:16 (KJV), “*Who **only** hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.*” New Testament passages that describe Jesus as God Incarnate never use comparative or competitive terms. Rather they use words that emphasize His exclusivity in that position. And that is Paul’s point in this verse. No other being is ever named in Scripture as “the image of the invisible God.” Jesus alone occupies that position. And with that unique position, He alone holds exclusive preeminence **over** all creation. He is over God’s creation, not a created being He can’t be a created being and be God, not a “Lesser god” as those who reject His full deity occasionally assert. “Given 1:19 and 2:9, εἰκὼν here signifies that Jesus is an exact, as well as a visible, representation of God.” (Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament)

Paul’s emphatic description of Jesus in these terms of unquestioned deity directly contradicted early gnostic ideas of a mystical and unknowable deity. Not only is God knowable, but He appeared in visible human flesh in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. And, in that position, He deserves the full glory, not merely a share of it.

*For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him.* This verse emphatically contradicts the created being error. Jesus can’t be both the Creator of all things and a created being. Did He create Himself before He existed? The idea is nonsensical. Take special note of Paul’s closing point in this verse, “...**and for him.**” God’s creation is “For Him,” not for our private ownership or use. If we fully honor Him in this way, all we are—and all that we have—we owe to Him and freely use for Him and for His glory.

Again, this point would contradict and refute the gnostic idea that all things material were a cosmic mistake and evil. Far

from that idea, Paul emphasized the truth that David beautifully expressed in Psalm 19:1, "***The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork.***"

*And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.* Again, Paul confronts and refutes both the ancient gnostic idea of a less-than-God-Jesus. How can He be part of all things created and also be before them? Impossible. He is eternal, not created. He is God, Creator, not part of creation.

"...and by him all things consist." "*Consist*" is a present tense verb. It describes something that existed then, and it exists now. Louw-Nida define the Greek word translated "*consist*" as "...to bring together or hold together something in its proper or appropriate place or relationship." Not only was Jesus personally and actively involved in the original creation, but He is presently actively engaged in holding this natural universe together in orderly form and relationship. Without His powerful holding all His creation together in this way, we could not study or predict chemical or other relationships or reactions. He is the intelligence behind the intelligent order of the natural universe. Intelligent design calls for an intelligent Creator, and Paul tells us who this Creator is.

*And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell.* As Jesus is the Creator and sustainer of all the natural creation, He is no less the Creator and sustainer of His spiritual creation. We may look with wonder at the beauties of nature and praise Him for its amazing existence. We should no less look at His church, His gospel, and all of His spiritual creation with equal wonder, for He also created it. The spiritual world revealed by the gospel is not a record of an evolution or a self-made world which man must cause by his actions, mental or physical. It is the result of His unique and exclusive creation. (Ephesians 2:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17 KJV)

In every point Paul made as he exalted Jesus throughout Colossians, he refuted the error that was slowly drawing the Colossians away from their preeminent Head and Savior. Oh, if God's children in our age could only learn Paul's teaching in Colossians. To the extent we think about adding anything, any act by us whatever, to Jesus and what He did for our salvation, we fall into the same errant snare that entangled the Colossians. Simply stated in Scripture, "...*he shall save his people from their sins.*" (Matthew 1:21 KJV) The angel did not tell Joseph that He plus their faith or their good works might save His people. He plus nothing by us is God's appointed and exclusive means of our salvation. And He is no less God's appointed and exclusive example for our daily life—and lifestyle. If people never read a Bible or heard a sermon, by observing our personal life, would they learn about Jesus alone, or would they conclude that we believe in Jesus plus something?

Elder Joe Holder