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THE COLOSSIAN EPISTLE (Part 2)

ETERNAL - SUPERNAL - TERMINAL

THE COLOSSIAN REPLY TO CHURCH ERROR

By: Charles D. Alexander

“And He is the Head of the Body, the Church”.
Colossians 1:18

The Colossian epistle is written around two great facts which govern all history and which solve the mystery of creation in its meaning and purpose.

The first is the FACT OF CHRIST, and the second the FACT OF THE CHURCH WHICH IS HIS BODY.

In the first part of our introductory exposition of the Colossian epistle (Serial Number 026-1) we have emphasised the words of Paul that all things were made by Christ, and for Christ, who is before all things and by whom all things consist (Col. 1:16-17). It is our task now to proceed to a consideration of the second great fact contained in the words, “And he is the head of the body, the church.” (Col. 1:18). That body is a mystical body in which and through which the life of the Risen Christ expresses itself in terms of a new and deathless creation which takes the place of the old and fallen creation of sin and death.

It follows by consequence that this new creation is the ultimate purpose of God in which all His designs are realised and through which His glory, grace, wisdom, love and power are fully unfolded. Moreover, it must be clearly seen that as ‘the Church which is His body’ is in fact the new creation, there cannot be any other ‘new creation’ nor can there be any other body, or sphere of salvation, or area of the divine working in redemption, outside the Church. In short, “the Church which

is His body” is the all-inclusive, all-exclusive world in which the wisdom of God finds its fulfillment.

The strange theory which has grown up in the last one hundred years that “the Church which is His body’ is irrelevant to prophecy and therefore to be disregarded as the true and final and full objective of all creation and all history, is so incredible that it must be put down to that steady decline in divine knowledge which has been the all too familiar pattern of these last days. That we do not exaggerate this situation, will appear later in this paper in a quotation made from the Scofield Reference Bible, one of the most widely circulated and revered of all Bible editions during the last one hundred years.

In his Colossian epistle Paul shows that in His mystical body, the Church, Christ suffers, feels, acts, endures, and triumphs; and therein He attains His true destiny and finds His glorious fulfillment - or as Paul puts it in an incomparable passage in his companion epistle to the Ephesians, the Father “hath put all things under his (Christ’s) feet and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, THE FULNESS OF HIM THAT FILLETH ALL IN ALL”.
(Ephesians 1:22-23)

If the Church is Christ’s fullness, or completion, that in which He fulfils His own glorious destiny, then there can be no other destiny, no other fullness, no other objective in creation save that which Christ realises for Himself in the Church which is His body.

The holy mystery of creation is that the Son should be eternally united in glorious and divine wedlock to His Bride, the Church, whom He redeems with His own lifeblood. Christ (says Paul) “loved the Church and gave Himself for it”.
(Ephesians 5:25)

It is also an inescapable consequence of the doctrine concerning Christ’s body, the Church, that the Church began with the human race in the Garden of Eden, under the same covenant of mercy which thousands of years later was sealed in the blood of Christ, but which was anticipated in the wisdom of God before the world was, according to the Pauline exposition, “Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world”. (Ephesians 1:4)

The continuity of the Church from the beginning of time to the end thereof, without interruption or curtailment, is one of the clearest teachings of Holy Scripture, though it has been strangely overclouded in these perilous last days.

The salvation of the Church exhausts all the redemptive purpose of God and as there has never been any other means of redemption from the Garden of Eden onward, than faith in the promise of life in Christ Jesus (see the PROTEVANGELIUM or first statement of the gospel of Genesis 3:15), all believers before Christ are as much a part of His Church as those after Christ, as we hope presently to make clear.

Those who plead for any special or exclusive place for Israel as a nation, and who think that Paul teaches such a future destiny for the Jewish people in Romans 11 must at least admit; that even in that much-quoted chapter there is no reference to the Jewish people as a body of believers considered apart from the Church. It is fundamental to the understanding of Paul's argument in Romans 11 that Jew and Gentile are comprehended in the one work of salvation, the one covenant of redemption, the one body, the one "Olive Tree", and they share the one glorious destiny.

"For as ye in times past have not believed God, yet have now obtained mercy through their unbelief:

Even so have these also now not believed, that through your mercy they also may obtain mercy.

For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all."

Romans 11:30-32

These verses allow no room for a separate Jewish church or kingdom.

The pre-eminence and finality of the Church in all the purposes of God as containing within herself the meaning and object of creation and thus revealing "the mystery of God and of the Father and of Christ" (Col. 2.vs.2), is elaborated by Paul to the full in the third chapter of Ephesians just quoted:

"And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world bath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places

might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,

According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in
Christ Jesus Our Lord:"

Ephesians 3:9-11

Involved in the redemption of the Church is the original purpose of God in making heaven and earth, which is that MAN should be the visible representative of the invisible God, ruling over all the works of creation (see Genesis 1, vs.26; Psalm 8, vs. 4-6; Hebrews 2, vs. 6-9). That destiny of MAN was to take precedence over the creation of angels ("For unto angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come whereof we speak" Hebrews 2, vs.5). Unquestionably it was Satan's envy against man (who was yet uncreated) which brought about the fall in the angelic creation, and precipitated into darkness the angels who sinned and kept not their first estate.

We know how quickly MAN also fell, and thus it seemed that the purpose of God was thwarted and unattainable but He who is above all and matchless in His wisdom had decreed from the beginning to turn evil into good by making it the means of the highest good. This could only be done by an act of self-abnegation by God Himself, and so the Eternal Son became man and yielded Himself in utter weakness to the power of evil. In the agony of the garden and under the curse of the tree He restored the Father's name and glory, and having approved Himself thus to be worthy to hold sway over all creation He as Man ascended on high and united Godhead to manhood. He realised in Himself the divine purpose in creation which was to display to the uttermost the divine wisdom and perfection and glory, and unite heaven and earth in acclaiming the greatness, the worth and the eternal love of God. Thus it is that in Jesus Christ Our Lord, man achieves his destiny in spite of sin and the fall.

Christ is the second Adam, the head of the new creation, and in Him man eternally reigns. Only as God is One in Essence yet subsisting in Three Persons could this be done, and only as He who died was God, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father who was God and with the Holy Spirit who was God (yet one God undivided in essence), could the task be accomplished. They who deny the deity of Christ have no atonement. They who deny the Holy Trinity have no God, and no answer to the problem of creation. But the redemption of the church as the new creation of God never to be corrupted, never to fail, but eternally to be glorified because her head is Christ and she is His body - this is the divine mystery revealed, the secret disclosed. These are the "unsearchable riches of Christ" which Paul marvelled that

he should be the unworthy instrument of unfolding (see Ephesians ch.3).

CREATION'S SECRET

If then the Church is as we have tried, to show, the object of that redeeming work by which God everlastingly determined to reveal Himself, and that this revealing of God is the mystery of creation, the secret which lay in the hidden depths of the divine wisdom till the hour should come when Christ should reveal it - then the Church must be and is the central and the greatest object in history, and takes precedence over all other institutions, orders, systems which may have gone before her. Certain it is that there can be nothing after her, for she is the bride, the body, the spouse of Christ and the total fruit of His sacrifice of Himself at Calvary. It seems almost irrelevant in the face of this to contend against those who allege, that the Church was not the sole and unique object of Christ's coming into the world.

The theory that the Church is only a temporary expedient to tide over the time till God's real purpose shall be resumed in the establishment of an earthly kingdom with its metropolis at Jerusalem is not only contrary to the Saviour's words to the Woman of Samaria ("Neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem" John 4:20), but is also irreconcilable with the Pauline doctrine of the Church that she is the eternal object of the divine purpose in creation, the consummation of all God's wisdom and of His vast designs in time and in eternity.

In the light of the Pauline doctrine, any attempt to prove that the Church is irrelevant to prophecy or is not the real and exclusive object of Christ's coming into the world, or that she has to be moved out of the way before the end in order to establish an earthly economy centred on Jerusalem, must be furnished with very formidable arguments and proofs. So far as we know, this proof has never been presented.

We have little doubt that there will be many who will be glad to have an exposition which makes valid their own faith and standing in Christ and which assures them that the death of Christ for them transcends all boundaries of nations or of time and that the atonement which covers their sins has elevated them to the rank of sons of God, they having received the spirit of adoption whereby they cry Abba Father (Romans ch.8). What more can, any earthly kingdom in Palestine do for them, seeing that in Christ they have already overcome death and sin and Satan and realised the entire object of God's purpose in creating the heavens and the earth?

ONE CHURCH IN OLD TESTAMENT AND NEW TESTAMENT

It appears to us moreover that not only is a very great error being permitted regarding the nature and standing and pre-eminence of the Church in relation to the impending future of the human race, but there is equal misunderstanding regarding the past history of the Church. That “the Church began at Pentecost” is a statement not quite true. What began at Pentecost was the N.T. manifestation of the Church, the Church’s full and most glorious chapter on earth. That the church is one in N.T. and O.T. is settled beyond all argument by Paul when he preaches that all who are in Christ are the children of Abraham who is “the father of us all” (Rom. 4, vs.15; Gal. 3, vs.29). Indeed Paul goes so far as to say that Jews no more than Gentiles may be regarded strictly speaking as the seed of Abraham. There is only one Person who is in that category and He is the Lord Christ alone. (“and to thy seed which is Christ” Gal. 3, vs. 16). The Jew is not the seed of Abraham. Christ is that seed and only as any are born again in Christ are they the children of Abraham and the children of God. “If ye be Christ’s then are ye Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3, vs. 29). These fundamental Scriptures are so much ignored by all parties in this controversy that we make no apology for insisting upon them here.

In the famous “circumcision” passage in Romans ch.4 Paul makes plain that the doctrine of justification by faith was revealed in Abraham before he was circumcised, and circumcision (the fleshly sign of being a descendant of Abraham) has therefore no significance in the realm of faith, for Abraham is shown to be the father of all who believe though they be not circumcised and the father of circumcision to those Jews who are not of the circumcision only but who walk in the steps of that same faith of Abraham which he had being yet uncircumcised (Rom. 4, vs.12).

Paul enlarges upon this when he declares that the promise to Abraham that he should be heir of the world (for so Paul interprets the O.T. promise as ranging far beyond the land of Palestine) is fulfilled only in Christ and, through Him in all who attain to the “righteousness which is by faith”:

“Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed: not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all.”

(Romans 4, vs. 16)

FATHER OF MANY NATIONS

After the same manner Paul interprets the promise to Abraham that he should be the father not of one nation but of many nations (vs.17) whose faith is the same in quality substance and object as Abraham's, be they Jew or Gentile. Thus was the promise to Abraham fulfilled which was implied in the change of his name from Abram (great father) to Abraham (father of many nations).

We intreat our friends to give careful study to these passages and set them alongside the view which so widely prevails that there is a special future for the Jew as a Jew. They will perceive that as Abraham is the father of all who believe be they Jew or Gentile, then are we Gentiles members with Abraham of the same church. Therefore, the church existed in Abraham's day and he was a member of it, and before his day for the catalogue of those who believe and are justified by faith alone stretches back in that great chapter of faith Hebrews 11 far beyond the flood, right back to the father of the human race at the beginning of human history – “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than that of Cain by which he obtained witness that he was righteous and by it he being dead yet speaketh”. (Heb. 11:4)

How say some therefore that the Church only began at Pentecost 2,000 years ago, when in fact it goes back to the first generation of the human race? The only difference between the faith of the O.T. Church and that of the N.T. Church is that O.T. believers looked forward to the fulfillment of the promise in Christ whereas N.T. believers look backward to the promise fulfilled. It is this promise of God and faith therein which constitutes the Church, and as the Church had her origin in the beginning of the human race so she will be on earth until the trumpet calls all creation to judgment.

FRIVOLOUS THEORIES

It can scarcely be said nowadays that the doctrine of the Church is the subject of profound erudition amongst the Lord's true people. We have been harassed for so long by theories well nigh frivolous which are propounded with a minimum of thought but with a maximum of incredible confidence, that it is difficult for the voice of truth and sanity to be heard in our evangelical corridors. We are awed by the almost sublime authority with which the strangest predictions are made regarding the Church's future in terms of her secret disappearance from the earth and her equally remarkable reappearance exactly seven years later to mingle, immortals with mortals, surviving Jews (now converted) and huge numbers of

surviving ungodly under the personal rule of Christ seated upon a throne at Jerusalem for the next one thousand years. Multitudes of ungodly are alleged to be there, survivors somehow of the event of the Second Coming. Nor is this one thousand years' reign a complete success, seeing (if the literal view be accepted) there shall be need of police, jailers, and hangmen, and terrible plagues to discipline those who absent themselves from religious festivals (see Zech. ch.14). It seems to us that the only hope for our friends is to spiritualise the Millennium and recognise that Christ is reigning NOW, and must continue to reign until all His foes are put under feet (1 Cor. 15: 25). But who are we to oppose interpretations which are propagated with such remarkable tones of infallibility? The Papal announcements from St. Peter's chair in Rome are modest compared with the prognostications now available in evangelical literature.

THE SCOFIELD BIBLE

The late Dr. C. I. Scofield (of whose character and Christian standing we desire to speak nothing but good), was surely terribly entangled in false prophetic theory when he wrote (page 975, Scofield Reference Bible - note on Zechariah 11, vs.11) "Neither the Gentiles nor the Gentile church corporately are in view. Only the believers out of Israel (*italics*) during this age. The church corporately is not in O.T. prophecy". We understand that in the latest edition of the Scofield Bible the editors have quietly dropped this sentence. We wonder why, when the note is essential to the survival of Dr. Scofield's system. Dr. Scofield was only ploughing with Mr. J. N. Darby's heifer, and it must be admitted that if the prophetic theory he inherited from this great "brethren" patriarch was correct he was being no more than logical when he insisted that the church as such is not to be found anywhere in O.T. prophecy. Yet Paul insists that the Church is the body of Christ; that the Church is the eternal purpose of God. The prophet prophesied of the salvation which the Apostles proclaimed says Peter and their words were only relevant to N.T. times (see 1 Peter 1:10-12). And Amos's wrote of Gentile salvation, said James, as he quoted from Amos ch.9.the words related to the setting up again of David's fallen house (See Acts 15). James quoted this prophecy to prove the validity of gentile salvation then being called into question.

Paul labours in all his writings to show that the Church of the N.T. is the lawful successor of the Church which existed in the O.T. and whose history is traced back to the first page of human history. Who can withstand his argument in Galatians that he who was child of the Law in O.T. times, subject to the schoolmaster's rod in the shape of the elements or rudiments of legal observances, rituals, dietary laws, and the whole apparatus of Levitical statutes is the grown up son who having

come of age, enters into the full inheritance and statue of sonship and inheritance in the N.T., the Spirit of Adoption now crying within him “Abba Father” to denote his coming, into the full and promised inheritance? To quote Paul’s words directly:

“Now I say, that the heir as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all;

But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father.

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:

But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son unto your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ”

Galatians 4: 1-7

To be continued [D.V.].