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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

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THE SECRET REVEALED

Proceeding in the usual Pauline manner in a series of consequences, the inspired Apostle pleads his unique office amongst the Gentile Colossians to “fulfill the Word of God” - that is, as the AV-KJV margin puts it (vs.25) “fully to preach the Word of God” - and describes his message in most elevated terms as “the mystery hid from ages and from generations but now is made manifest” to the Church (vs. 26). Again he is approaching his fundamental theme, the unique character of the N.T. Church as the final expression of divine grace and the full unfolding of the divine mystery. The “mystery” is the same as that of which he writes simultaneously in his letter to Ephesus (Eph. 3, vs.3-11). The mystery is not that God will have a Church, for He has always had a Church from the beginning of the world. The mystery lies in the full revelation of the nature and purpose of the Church. Till Christ came it could never be fully understood that the Church is a body of believers in direct communion with God through Christ their head and destined to be raised to the highest degree of grace and glory in eternal union with God Himself through the incarnate Son, Christ Jesus.

Paul makes this clear in the remarkable words -

“To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of: glory.”
(vs. 27)

Christ is revealed not only as the One through whom we receive forgiveness of sins but higher yet as One who, being the everlasting Word, in whom all the fullness of the Godhead bodily resides, dwells within His redeemed people and unites them to the living God as being all one with the Father.

The goal of redemption is the goal of creation, namely that God should have a myriad sons as His offspring through whom He will reign, to whom He will give universal dominion as Lord of Creation, in whom He will see Himself and through whom He will make visible His own eternal glory and nature so as to fill all creation with joy and praise.

“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, vs.10, 11

As the purpose of creation was forfeited by sinful man so that the race through which God’s design was to be realised was disinherited and cast off, therefore Christ came, the Seed of the Woman to crush the serpent’s dominion and by becoming MAN to achieve what man failed to do- Hence in the Upper Room at the moment of His departure for the agony of the garden and the sacrifice of Golgotha, He prayed, “I have glorified thee on the earth; I have finished the work that thou gavest me to do, and now O Father glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was” (John 17, vs.4,5). The atonement was completed when the Son rendered to the Father that which creation had denied, and uniting in Himself God and Man, carried humanity up to the eternal throne where in partnership with Him and by His merits alone, the redeemed will reign forever over all.

Paul summarises it all in the words, “The riches of the glory of this mystery, Christ in you the hope of glory”. (Col. 1, vs.27)

So stupendous a conception must not be placed in peril by earthly doctrines which bypass Christ and go back to the “weak and beggarly elements” of outmoded Judaism. (Gal. 4, vs. 9)

Not for one moment would the great Apostle hazard so great a destiny by compromising on this fundamental issue. He devotes the whole of the second chapter of Colossians to a defence of the Gospel mystery against all such beggarly conceptions-

“For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh;

That their hearts might be comforted being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ;

In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Colossians 2, vs. 1, 3

Here are riches of assurance, understanding, enlightenment, and infinite treasure of wisdom and knowledge.

Yet not understanding this unveiling of the full and final “mystery of God and of the Father and of Christ”, there are those (sincere men beyond all doubt) who mistakenly and most enthusiastically contend for the right to cut the ground from under their own feet by writing the Church small and characterising her as a mere temporary expedient to bridge the gap created by Jewish unbelief two thousand years ago. They boldly teach that all the apparatus of the Old Covenant must yet be restored in the shape of temple, priest and sacrifice and the old rituals displace that divine worship of the Father “in spirit and in truth” which Christ told the woman at the well was the purpose of His coming into the world (John 4: 21-23).

With invective almost fierce, and pleading most affecting, the Apostle seeks to draw the Gentiles from this great error of substituting the earthly for the spiritual. If in Christ are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge then having Christ we have all, and look for no further or future development or alteration on earth of the divine purpose.

“This I say lest any man should beguile you with enticing words”

“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men after the rudiments of the world and not after Christ”

“For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and you (Gentiles) are (already) complete in him who is the head of all principality and power”.

Chap. 2: 8-10

Circumcision? The “cutting” of the Old Covenant? We have a circumcision made without hands in the new birth by which we have put off the body of the sins of the flesh (vs.11).

Our baptism (Paul continues) signifies much more than any Jewish ordinance. It shows we are buried with Christ in His tomb of death and are risen with Him through “the faith of the operation of God who raised Him from the dead” (vs. 12). “We were dead in sins and the unregeneracy of our flesh, but now have been quickened and made alive in Christ, all our sins being forgiven and taken away” (vs.13).

The Old Covenant which was written upon tables of stone has been shattered. It never could be kept because of the weakness and depravity of sinful man. Its writings along with all the apparatus of external ordinances were contrary to us. The Law could never pronounce us righteous and its rituals have been blotted out by Christ. The entire apparatus of Judaism has been “nailed to His cross”. (vs. 14)

What the old Law could not do, Christ has done. He has “spoiled principalities and powers”. He has destroyed Satan and brought down the devil’s kingdom in ruins. He suffered death that He might destroy death, and endured evil that He might end all evil and restore creation to the Father as a pure and holy thing. (v. 15)

“Let no man therefore judge you in meat or drink or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days;” (v. 16).

These ordinances were only shadows. The substance is Christ (v.17).

Beware (the apostle warns) lest any man rob you of your reward by teaching you to observe rites which Christ has abolished, and by inventing pieties and religious observances which God has not authorised (v.18).

For all these things are not so much sins of ignorance as willful sins of religious pride. They spring from an apostate source – “not holding the head” - a denial of the body of Christ. The Church being united to Christ spiritually receives all increase and blessing from the one true source (v.19).

Why, if you are as dead to the earthly shadow of O.T. observances as Christ was dead to them when He lay in the tomb - why are you so ready to live again according to those fleshly rules “touch not, taste not, handle not, which all are to perish with the- using” not being of the substance of everlasting life? (vs. 20-22).

Man-made doctrines, teaching the alleged permanence of outward forms, impose upon the minds and consciences of the unwary and the ignorant. The fleshly mind loves the outward forms of religion because it is averse to things of the Spirit. It loves to surrender itself to the charm of fleshly religion, rather than to the spiritual experience of Christ. Outward forms of religion please the carnal mind because of the illusion of merit conveyed by a voluntary submission to forms and ceremonies no longer commanded by God. It gives an illusion of humility which is really a subtle form of religious pride. To neglect the body is no substitute for feeding the soul. Excessive and ostentatious fasting gives an appearance of sanctity as though voluntary deprivation pleases God, whereas it is only a subtle satisfying of the flesh. This is what Paul is saying in verse 23. Forsaking of sin is a very different thing from practising the outward forms of ritualistic piety.

The remainder of the Epistle to the Colossians (ch. 3-4) consists of instruction concerning the consistent behaviour of those who, risen with Christ, ought to be seeking the things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God (ch.3, vs.1).

The first principle of our new life is to set our affection on heavenly things for we are dead in Christ to this world and our true life is with Christ in God (vs.3). When Christ our life appears at His second coming, that will be the signal for fullness of life in the eternal glory (v, 4). How consistent then must it be for those whose destiny is so high and glorious that they mortify the deeds of their carnal nature by refraining from the pollutions of sin and the errors of this world, steadfastly devoting themselves to the nurture of that new and divine nature which is formed in them after the image of Christ? Let them behave as it becomes the Lord’s elect,

holy and beloved, Let them be merciful and kind, humble, meek, and patient, even as Christ, living and forbearing, putting on the garment of love and peace. Let them manifest the word of Christ in themselves in spiritual worship, songs of praise, and psalms of divine instruction. Let all be done in the name of Christ and His glory. (See vs. 12-17)

Wives and husbands, children and parents, should fulfill the obligations of true and blessed family religion. Earthly duties and relationships should be regulated according to the rule of Christ. Let servants and masters see all things through the eye of Christ whom they both serve. Let prayer be maintained, especially that the Word of God be preached and go forth to all men. Watch your speech - especially when the ungodly are around! Take examples from the lives of notable saints. See what varieties of gift and grace God has set in the church, and let those who bear responsibility in the church be diligent in the execution of it, and never forget to pray for me Paul in my bonds! (See from ch. 3, vs.18 to the end of ch. 4.)
