

The Colossian Heresy VS the Supremacy of Christ

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The Crisis in the Valley of the Lycus

In the shadow of Mount Cadmus, where the cool waters of the Lycus River flowed through the Phrygian interior, lay the city of Colossae. Once a bustling metropolis of commerce described by Herodotus as a "great city," by the middle of the first century A.D., it had dwindled in significance, overshadowed by its wealthier neighbors, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Yet, in the divine economy of Scripture, this fading city became the battlefield for a theological conflict that would shape the understanding of Jesus Christ for millennia. It was here, amidst a cosmopolitan mix of Phrygian pagans, Greek settlers, and a significant Jewish diaspora, that a dangerous spiritual contagion began to fester—a contagion scholars have come to call the "Colossian Heresy."

The Apostle Paul, imprisoned in Rome—chained perhaps to a Praetorian guard but unchained in spirit—received a visitor named Epaphras. This faithful minister, who had likely planted the Colossian church during Paul's Ephesian ministry, brought news that was simultaneously encouraging and alarming. The believers were growing in faith and love, yet a sinister philosophy was creeping into the congregation. It was a "persuasive argument" that did not brazenly deny Jesus but subtly dethroned Him. It was a syncretistic blend of Jewish legalism, pagan mysticism, and early Gnostic thought that promised a "fuller" spirituality, a "deeper" knowledge, and a "higher" experience than the simple gospel of the cross could provide.¹

The ancient city of Colossae sat in a region known for its "burning" ground—volcanic soil that made it fertile but also prone to earthquakes. In a similar vein, the spiritual ground was volatile. The Phrygians were known for their ecstatic emotional worship of nature deities like Cybele, which involved wild frenzies and ascetic self-mutilation. The Greeks brought their love of philosophy, logic, and speculation. The Jewish population, established there by Antiochus the Great centuries prior, had become somewhat estranged from rigorous Jerusalem orthodoxy, incorporating local folk beliefs and angelology into their monotheism.¹

It is within this cauldron of competing worldviews that the "Colossian Heresy" emerged. It was not a single, codified religion but a "syncretism"—a "self-made religion" (Colossians 2:23) that borrowed the "best" parts of various worldviews to create a spiritual super-system.⁴ It appealed to the human desire for exclusivity. It whispered, "Jesus is good, but He is not enough. You need Jesus *plus* circumcision. Jesus *plus* angel worship. Jesus *plus* secret knowledge."

This "Jesus Plus" theology is the hallmark of all heresy. As Warren Wiersbe notes in his commentary, *Be Complete*, the danger was not that they denied Christ, but that they dethroned Him. They did not eliminate Him; they supplemented Him, implying His insufficiency.³ The report that follows seeks to exhume the nature of this ancient error, examining it through the lens of Scripture and the insights of giants in the faith—Voddie Baucham, John MacArthur, John Piper, Warren Wiersbe, C.S. Lewis, Charles Spurgeon, and biblical scholars like D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo. We will traverse the landscape of the first century to understand the "elemental spirits" and the "worship of angels," and we will stand with Paul as he unveils the Cosmic Christ, the Image of the Invisible God, in whom all fullness dwells.

Table 1: The Spiritual Landscape of Colossae

Influence	Description	Impact on Colossian Church
Phrygian Paganism	Worship of nature deities, ecstatic frenzies, fear of elemental spirits (<i>stoicheia</i>).	Created a fear of cosmic forces and a desire for "protection" through rituals.
Hellenistic Philosophy	Emphasis on <i>gnosis</i> (knowledge), dualism (spirit = good, matter = evil), and logic.	Introduced the idea that simple faith was insufficient; "higher knowledge" was needed.
Jewish Mysticism	Speculation on angels, dietary laws, Sabbath observance, Merkabah mysticism.	Imposed legalistic requirements and angel veneration as necessary for holiness.
Christian Gospel	Salvation by grace through faith in the sufficiency of Christ's atonement.	The foundational truth being attacked by the "Jesus Plus" additions.

The Nature of the Beast: Defining the Indefinable Heresy

Scholars have long debated the precise label for the false teaching at Colossae. Was it Gnosticism? Was it Jewish Merkabah mysticism? Was it pagan asceticism? The evidence within the epistle suggests it was a "Colossian cocktail" containing elements of all three, creating a formidable spiritual rival to the simplicity of the Gospel.

The Shadow of Gnosticism and Dualism

While fully developed Gnosticism (with its complex systems of aeons and demiurges) did not appear until the second century, the seeds—often called "incipient Gnosticism" or "proto-Gnosticism"—were already germinating in Paul's day.¹ The word *Gnosticism* comes from the Greek *gnosis* (knowledge). These thinkers operated on a fundamental premise of **dualism**: the belief that matter was inherently evil and spirit was inherently good. This created a massive theological problem for them: How could a Holy God (pure Spirit) create a physical world (evil matter)?

Their solution was a hierarchy of emanations. They taught that the Supreme God did not create the world directly, for that would soil His hands with matter. Instead, He threw off an emanation (a spiritual being), which threw off another, and another, getting further

from God and more "dense" until a lower, foolish deity (often identified by Gnostics as the God of the Old Testament) created the material universe.⁷

In this system, Jesus could not be God in the flesh, because God would never touch evil matter. Thus, the Gnostics argued one of two things: either the "Christ spirit" came upon the man Jesus at baptism and left before the crucifixion, or Jesus only *seemed* to have a body (Docetism). John MacArthur explains that this heresy attacked the very heart of the Incarnation. If Jesus is merely one of a series of emanations, He is not the Creator, nor is He the sufficient Savior.⁸ He becomes merely a rung on a ladder, rather than the ladder itself.

Voddie Baucham identifies this ancient dualism as the ancestor of modern worldview confusion. Just as the Gnostics separated the "spiritual" from the "material," modern secularism (and even some Christianity) separates "sacred" from "secular," failing to see Christ's preeminence over all.⁹

The Jewish Element: Mysticism and Legalism

Paul's references to "festivals," "new moons," and "sabbaths" (Colossians 2:16) clearly indicate a Jewish influence. However, this was not the standard Pharisaical legalism Paul fought in Galatia. This was a mystical Judaism. Historical research points to groups like the Essenes or practitioners of "Merkabah mysticism," who sought visions of the heavenly throne room (the *Merkabah* or chariot of God). These mystics engaged in rigorous fasting and asceticism to purify themselves for an ascent through the heavens, where they would encounter angels.³

This was a religion of **intimidation**. It suggested that unless one kept the strict dietary codes and experienced the ecstatic visions of the angelic realms, one was a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God. It was a "shadow" that obscured the substance.

The Worship of Angels (*Threskeia ton angelon*)

Perhaps the most peculiar and dangerous aspect of the heresy was the "worship of angels" mentioned in Colossians 2:18. Some interpreters, like Francis and those cited by biblical historians, suggest this implies the heretics wanted to join in the liturgy of the angels.⁶ However, the text in Colossians 2:18 suggests a more idolatrous practice: venerating angels as mediators.

Because the Supreme God was seen as too high, too holy, and too far removed from the material world (a Gnostic influence), these false teachers posited that one needed to approach Him through intermediaries. Angels were the ladder rungs to the divine. This "humility" was false; it was a pious-sounding rejection of the access granted by the Son.¹⁰ It was the ancient equivalent of saying, "I am too unworthy to speak to the King, so I will pray to his servants."

John MacArthur provides a scathing critique of this tendency, noting that in modern times, this fascination with angels often reappears in New Age spirituality or even hyper-charismatic circles where "angel encounters" are valued above the clear teaching of Scripture. He argues that whenever men claim to speak for angels or have visions that supplement Scripture, they are "vainly puffed up" by a fleshly mind.¹²

Asceticism and the *Stoicheia*

Paul warns against the "basic principles of the world" (*stoicheia tou kosmou*). In ancient Greek philosophy, this term referred to the elemental substances—earth, wind, fire, water. But in Paul's context, as Douglas Moo and D.A. Carson note, it likely referred to the elemental *spirits* or demonic powers associated with the stars and planets, which were thought to control human destiny.⁴

The people of Colossae lived in fear of these cosmic forces. They believed their fate was written in the stars. To appease these powers and escape the prison of the body, the heretics practiced severe asceticism: "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle" (Colossians 2:21). They believed that by punishing the body, they could liberate the soul. This was a "severe treatment of the body" (Col 2:23) that had an "appearance of wisdom" but lacked any power against the flesh.¹⁵

The Apostolic Refutation: The Supremacy of the Son (Colossians 1:15-20)

Paul does not waste time debating the intricacies of their angelology or the logic of their dietary codes. He knows that the only way to displace a lie is to overwhelm it with the Truth. He counters the "poverty" of their philosophy with the "riches" of Christ. He launches into what scholars call the "Christ Hymn" (Colossians 1:15-20), a theological supernova that illuminates the dark corners of the Colossian error.

The Image of the Invisible God (v. 15)

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." (Colossians 1:15, NKJV)

The Greek word for "image" is *eikon*. It means more than a likeness; it means a precise manifestation and representation. As John MacArthur preaches, God is invisible spirit, but Jesus is the visible representation of His essence. "If you want to know what God is like," H.B. Charles Jr. notes (echoing MacArthur), "just look at Jesus".¹⁶

To the Gnostic who claimed God was unknowable, distant, and wholly other, Paul declares: God has made Himself visible. He is not hidden behind a veil of aeons; He is revealed in the Son.

The term "firstborn" (*prototokos*) has been twisted by Arians (and modern Jehovah's Witnesses) to suggest Jesus was a created being. However, biblical scholars like Voddie Baucham and D.A. Carson clarify that in the Hebraic context, "firstborn" refers to *rank* and *inheritance*, not biological origin. Baucham notes that David was the youngest son of Jesse, yet God called him His "firstborn" (Psalm 89:27) because he was preeminent.¹⁷ Jesus is the Sovereign over creation, not a product of it. He holds the rights of the primogeniture over the entire cosmos.

The Agent and Aim of Creation (v. 16)

"For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth... All things were created through Him and for Him." (Colossians 1:16, NKJV)

Here Paul strikes a death blow to the Gnostic idea that a lesser deity (a Demiurge) created the world.

- **"By Him" (En auto):** He is the creative center and atmosphere.
- **"Through Him" (Di autou):** He is the instrumental agent.
- **"For Him" (Eis auton):** He is the ultimate goal.

Charles Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, captures the magnitude of this in his sermon "Christ the Creator":

"Jesus is the clue of the universe; its centre and explanation... To live to Jesus, then, is to find out the true object of our being... It is clear that He must triumph. All is going well. If we look at history from His throne, all things are 'for Him.'" ¹⁹

Paul explicitly includes "thrones or dominions or principalities or powers." These were the very angelic ranks the Colossians were tempted to worship. Paul is essentially saying, "Why worship the throne when you can know the One who built it?" Jesus is not a peer of the angels; He is their Author. C.S. Lewis adds a philosophical layer to this, noting that because Christ created "all things"—including matter—the physical world cannot be inherently evil. "God likes matter," Lewis quips. "He invented it".²⁰ This refutes the dualism at the heart of the heresy.

The Sustainer of the Cosmos (v. 17)

"And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist." (Colossians 1:17, NKJV)

The word "consist" (*synesteken*) means "hold together" or "stand together." Jesus is the cosmic glue. If He were to withdraw His power for a microsecond, the universe would fly apart into chaos. John Piper, in his impassioned messages on this text, invites us to feel the weight of this: "He holds everything together. He isn't just the means. He is the great end".²¹

This refutes the Deistic or Gnostic view of a detached God. The Creator is intimately involved in the physics of every atom. He is the logic (*Logos*) that keeps the stars in their courses and the breath in our lungs. Voddie Baucham notes that this truth—that Christ holds all things together—is the foundation for a Christian worldview. If Christ is the logic of the universe, then there is no "secular" truth separate from Him. All truth is Christ's truth.²²

The Fullness of the Godhead (v. 19)

"For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell." (Colossians 1:19, NKJV)

The word "fullness" is *pleroma*. This was a favorite technical term of the Gnostics. They used it to describe the sum total of all the divine emanations and powers that filled the space between God and man. Paul hijacks their vocabulary and sanctifies it. He tells the Colossians, "You are looking for the *pleroma*? You are climbing ladders and starving yourselves to find the fullness of God? It is all in Jesus."

Voddie Baucham emphasizes this point against modern relativism. Just as the ancient world sought "fullness" in secret knowledge, the postmodern world seeks it in self-definition. But Paul asserts that *all* fullness—not a fraction, not an emanation—dwells in Christ.⁹

And crucially, it dwells in Him *bodily* (Colossians 2:9). This counters the Gnostic hatred of the physical body. God was pleased to house His entire infinite glory in a physical human frame. Matter is not evil; it is redeemable, capable of bearing the weight of glory.

The Trap of Philosophy and Tradition (Colossians 2:8-10)

Having established the supremacy of Christ, Paul turns to the defense. He warns the Colossians not to be kidnapped by the intellectual allure of the heresy.

"Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ." (Colossians 2:8, NKJV)

The Hollow Deception

The word "cheat" or "spoil" (KJV) means to carry off as plunder. False teaching kidnaps the mind. Paul is not condemning the pursuit of knowledge or the love of wisdom (*philosophia*) in general. As C.S. Lewis famously argued, "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered".²³

What Paul condemns is philosophy that is "not according to Christ." Any system of thought—whether secular humanism, Marxism, or Gnostic mysticism—that does not start with Christ as the cornerstone is "empty deceit." It is a hollow shell.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, exposes the demonic strategy of "Christianity And." Screwtape advises his nephew Wormwood to keep the patient in the state of "Christianity And"—Christianity and the War, Christianity and Social Justice, Christianity and Vegetarianism. The Gnostics were peddling "Christianity and Gnosis." Modern false teachers peddle "Christianity and Psychology," "Christianity and Politics," or "Christianity and Prosperity."

Lewis notes, "If they must be Christians let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for faith itself some Fashion with a Christian colouring".²⁴ Paul warns that this is a trap. Christ is not a component of a worldview; He is the lens through which all reality must be viewed.

The Elementary Spirits (*Stoicheia*)

Douglas Moo and other scholars argue that the "basic principles of the world" refer to the elementary way of thinking that characterizes unredeemed humanity—a system of transactional religion. "If I do this, the gods will do that." "If I abstain from this, I will be holy." This is the ABCs of paganism.⁴

To go back to legalism or mysticism is to graduate from university (Christ) only to return to kindergarten (the *stoicheia*). It is a regression.

The Antidote: Complete in Him

"For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power." (Colossians 2:9–10, NKJV)

This is the thesis statement of the epistle.

- 1. Christ is Fully God:** "Fullness of the Godhead bodily." No emanation. No junior god. He is the I AM.
- 2. The Believer is Fully Complete:** "You are complete in Him."

The Greek word for "complete" is *pleroo*, related to *pleroma*. It means "filled full." It is a nautical term used of a ship fully rigged and ready to sail. It is a mathematical term for a completed equation.

If you are "complete in Him," you do not need the Gnostic's secrets. You do not need the legalist's rules. You do not need the mystic's visions. You have the Head, and in having the Head, you have everything the body needs.

The Three-Headed Monster: Legalism, Mysticism, Asceticism

In Colossians 2:16–23, Paul dismantles the practical outworking of the heresy. He identifies three specific traps that threaten the believer's liberty.

The Trap of Legalism (The Shadow)

"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."
(Colossians 2:16–17, NKJV)

The false teachers were obsessed with dietary laws and calendars. They judged spirituality by what was on the plate or what day was observed. Warren Wiersbe calls this "religious exterior decoration." It looks good on the outside, but it lacks life.²⁵

Paul calls these things "shadows." A shadow has no substance of its own; it merely indicates that something real is casting it. When a loved one returns home, you do not hug their shadow; you embrace them. Christ is the *substance* (the body). Now that the Reality has come, why play with the shadow?

John Piper argues that failing to see Christ as the substance leads to a small, shadowy faith. "If you don't embrace a Christ that is big enough and clear enough, you easily mistake shadows for reality".²⁶ The law was a tutor to bring us to Christ, but now that Christ has come, we are no longer under the tutor.

The Trap of Mysticism (The Intruder)

"Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind." (Colossians 2:18, NKJV)

Here is the "worship of angels." The heretic takes "delight" in a false humility. This is the person who says, "I am too humble to go to God directly; I need a vision, a sign, an angel."

Paul says this person is "intruding" into things he has not seen. The KJV translation "intruding" is powerful. It suggests entering a domain where one does not belong. These mystics claimed to be entering the heavenly holy of holies through their visions, but Paul says they are merely inflating their own egos.

John MacArthur provides a scathing critique of this tendency in the modern church. He draws parallels between the Colossian "visions" and the modern Charismatic claims of private revelation. "Experience is not the authority," MacArthur thunders. "The Word of God is the authority." When men claim to speak for angels or have visions that

supplement Scripture, they are "vainly puffed up" by a fleshly mind.¹² True humility relies on God's revelation, not one's own imagination.

The Trap of Asceticism (The Failure)

"Therefore, if you died with Christ... why... do you subject yourselves to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle'?" (Colossians 2:20–21, NKJV)

The Gnostics believed the body was the prison of the soul, so they treated it harshly (*aphideia*). They starved it, beat it, and denied it pleasure. This "severe treatment of the body" (v. 23) has an "appearance of wisdom." It looks impressive. The monk in the desert, the faster on the mountain—they look holy.

But Paul delivers a devastating verdict: *"These things... are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."* (v. 23).

Asceticism fails because it deals only with the outside. You can chain a tiger, but you cannot change its nature by chaining it. Voddie Baucham and reformed theologians emphasize that the heart is the problem. A man can be sitting in a monastery, fasting from bread, while his mind is feasting on pride and lust.

C.S. Lewis, in his discussion on "The Trouble with 'X'", notes that we are often harsher with our bodies than God intends, yet more lenient with our pride. God "likes matter; He invented it".²⁰ The goal of Christianity is not the destruction of the body, but its sanctification.

Living the Risen Life (Colossians 3)

Paul does not end with theology; he moves to application. If we are dead to the "basic principles," how do we live?

"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." (Colossians 3:1, NKJV)

This is the true mysticism. Not seeking visions of angels, but fixing the mind's eye on the enthroned Christ.

This is the true asceticism. "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth" (Colossians 3:5, KJV). But this mortification (putting to sin) is not done to earn salvation, but because of salvation. It is not starving the body of food, but starving the sinful nature of lust, greed, and malice.

C.S. Lewis captures this dynamic in *Mere Christianity*: "The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to

Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead... to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be 'good'.²⁷

The Colossian heretics were trying to be "good" through mechanism. Paul says we become good through union. "Christ is our life" (Colossians 3:4). When He appears, we also will appear with Him in glory.

Table 2: The Colossian Heresy vs. The Pauline Response

Component of Heresy	Description	Paul's Refutation (Colossians)	Key Theological Insight
Hollow Philosophy	Reliance on human tradition and "gnosis" (secret knowledge).	Col 2:3: "In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."	Christ is the <i>Logos</i> ; true wisdom is relational, not speculative.
Dualism / Emanations	Matter is evil; God is distant; Christ is a lower emanation.	Col 1:19, 2:9: "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily."	The Incarnation validates the physical world. Jesus is fully God.
Worship of Angels	Venerating angels as necessary mediators to reach the distant God.	Col 1:16, 2:18: Christ created "thrones and dominions"; He is the Head.	Why worship the servant when you know the King? Christ is the only Mediator.
Legalism (Shadows)	Obsession with dietary laws, new moons, Sabbath regulations.	Col 2:17: "These are a shadow... but the substance is of Christ."	Rituals were signposts pointing to Jesus. The reality has arrived.
Asceticism	"Do not touch, do not taste." Harsh treatment of the body to curb sin.	Col 2:23: These rules lack "value against the indulgence of the flesh."	External severity cannot change the internal heart. Only regeneration works.
Elemental Spirits	Fear of <i>stoicheia</i> (astrological/demonic powers) controlling fate.	Col 2:15: Christ "disarmed principalities and powers... triumphing over them."	The Cross was a cosmic victory. Believers are dead to the power of these spirits.

The Voices of Orthodoxy

To understand the weight of Paul's argument, we must listen to the chorus of theologians who have echoed his message through the ages.

Voddie Baucham warns us that the Colossian heresy is alive today in the form of "Cultural Gnosticism." When society tells us that truth is subjective and that we must find our own "gnosis" inside ourselves, we are hearing the echo of the Lycus Valley. Baucham calls the church to stand firm on the objective truth of Christ's supremacy over all cultures and ideologies.⁹

John MacArthur reminds us that the battle is always for the Lordship of Christ. The Gnostics wanted a Savior who was a safe, distant abstraction. MacArthur argues that

the Jesus of Colossians is a Sovereign who demands total allegiance. To bow to angels or traditions is to commit treason against the King.⁸

John Piper points us to the joy of the Fullness. He argues that legalism is the enemy of joy because it turns God into a taskmaster. But the "Fullness" of God in Christ is an ocean of delight. "Christian Hedonism" finds its validation here: we are most satisfied in Him because He is the *Pleroma* of all good.²⁶

Warren Wiersbe simplifies the complexity of the heresy into a simple equation: "You are complete in Him." He warns against the "religious exterior decoration" that distracts from the simplicity of walking with Jesus. His commentary serves as a practical guide for the believer who feels overwhelmed by the demands of religious performance.⁵

C.S. Lewis provides the philosophical underpinning. He helps us see that the Christian claim—that the Infinite God became a baby, ate fish, and had dirty feet—is the only story that satisfies the human longing for both Myth and Fact. It is the "True Myth" that shatters the dualism of the Gnostics.²⁸

Charles Spurgeon brings the devotional heat. He refuses to let us treat these truths as cold academic facts. He calls us to "plunge into the ocean" of Christ's fullness. "I have a great need of Christ," Spurgeon confesses, "but I have a great Christ for my need".²⁹

Douglas Moo and D.A. Carson ground us in history. They remind us that this was a real battle, fought by real people in a real city. Their scholarship prevents us from turning the heresy into a straw man, helping us see the subtle attractiveness of the "Jesus Plus" philosophy.⁴

Holding Fast to the Head

The Colossian Heresy, though ancient, is remarkably modern. It is the perennial temptation to move beyond the gospel, to graduate from Jesus to "deeper" things.

- The **Legalist** says, "Christ is not enough; I need rules."
- The **Mystic** says, "Christ is not enough; I need experiences."
- The **Intellectual** says, "Christ is not enough; I need philosophy."
- The **Ascetic** says, "Christ is not enough; I need suffering."

To all of them, the Apostle Paul—and the chorus of faithful theologians from Spurgeon to Baucham—shouts one glorious word: **Enough**.

Jesus is the Image of the Invisible God. He is the Firstborn over all creation. He is the Creator of the angels you are tempted to worship. He is the substance of the shadows you are tempted to keep. He is the fullness of the Godhead in a body.

As we stand in the 21st century, bombarded by the "empty deceit" of secularism, the "self-made religion" of moralistic therapeutic deism, and the "worship of angels" in New Age spirituality, we must heed the warning of Colossians 2:8. We must refuse to be taken captive. We must hold fast to the Head.

For in the final analysis, there is no secret knowledge that can save. There is only the open mystery, revealed to the saints: *"Christ in you, the hope of glory"* (Colossians 1:27).

"And you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power."
(Colossians 2:10, NKJV)

Soli Deo Gloria.