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THE COLOSSIAN HERESY PART 2

DISCERNING ITS PRESENCE

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“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority” (Colossians 2:8-10)

The Colossians were being threatened by a “philosophy” that, if believed, would make them plunder of false teachers who denied the sufficiency of Christ. In the last issue we examined the key tenets of this teaching and explained the background of it in the first century culture of Colossae. Since people there lived under fear of the *stoicheia* (meaning hostile spiritual forces as used in Colossians), the promoters of the Colossian heresy promised answers to their fears. In order to make the Colossian Christians their prey, it was necessary that their would-be victims did not know that they were already complete in Christ, who is head over all powers, hostile or otherwise. The passage cited above shows that Paul pointed to the sufficiency of Christ as the antidote to the “philosophy.”

In this issue we shall examine modern versions of the Colossian heresy and show certain characteristics they have in common, thus equipping our readers to discern this heresy in whatever form it appears. There are so many variations in expression of the error, that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to catalogue them all. What is important is to understand and apply Paul’s warnings to current teachings. I will divide the modern expressions of the Colossian heresy into three categories for the sake of clarity: (1) Elitists who claim special status based on special experiences, revelations or legalistic practices; (2) The pro-

motion of “secrets” to a higher level Christian life; (3) Spiritual warfare teachings that promote unbiblical techniques for dealing with the hostile powers, thus effectively denying the sufficiency of Christ’s finished work. I will show that the answer to the Colossian heresy is the sufficiency of Christ.

THE NEW SPIRITUAL ELITE

In Colossae Paul warned of would-be judges who claimed status because of “having entered and seen” (Colossians 2:18). The elitists may have seen the workings of the evil powers, thus claiming knowledge of how to defeat them, or they may have seen good powers, thus calling on angels as intermediaries. What the elitists all claim is that they have entered a higher level and have revelation concerning the unseen spiritual world, and that we supposedly need this information if we hope to be safe from the hostile powers or spiritual curses.

Many examples of such modern claims have been critiqued in previous issues of CIC.¹ In my thirty years in the ministry I have seen: those who had special encounters with angels and thus received secret information (one book was later debunked as a fraud), others who had previously been in the occult who claimed that they brought special information with them when they became Christian (like defectors from

the enemy camp who stole secret information), a book that contained information gained through deliverance sessions when demons would speak through their victims (the authors had “forced” the demons to tell their secrets — now there is a reliable source!), and elitists claimed to have entered heaven and talked to Jesus and departed saints, thus gaining special information not available in Scripture.

What makes such books sell is the belief that we can gain secrets to make life go well. The secrets are not accessible to all, but only through these elitists who have them. This is very clearly what was happening in Colossae. Paul tells us not to let this happen. We do not need new revelations to keep us from a bad “fate” (i.e. negative events in our lives) or hostile spiritual powers. These are what the elitist revelators of our day always offer, often getting very rich doing so. Some have even taken up the clever scheme used by “success” moguls of the infomercial variety — teach others the “secret” to doing it for yourself. I once met and debated a man who was peddling books and teachings that claimed to show Christians how to get revelations by learning about their hidden spiritual “senses.” There was even a chart in his book about getting into the alpha brain wave state (an altered state of consciousness) so that you can gain more revelations. The idea was that getting in touch with the unseen spirit world was the key to hearing from God and gaining power and success in one’s Christian walk. This particular peddler of the Colossian heresy had no trouble finding churches who paid him to bring his false teaching to their congregations.

My research has shown that these types of schemes to defraud Christians are ubiquitous. I get calls and emails from readers alerting me to many modern versions of the Colossian heresy. They travel from congregation to con-

gregation, mutating and spreading like viruses. With websites, email, and easy means of electronic reproduction, these heresies easily enter homes and churches by stealth. No one could publish a comprehensive list of all the versions of the Colossian heresy, because it would miss many of them that operate “below the radar.” This is not to say that it is futile to warn of particular false teachers. On the contrary we should; Paul did. It is to say that it is imperative that we learn the nature of the heresy so that we quickly see it in any incarnation. Colossians 2 gives us the principles that we need to make the applications. Elitism itself is a key identifying factor. If Christ and His provision for all His elect is sufficient, then all true Christians have the same status in Christ — none are elite.

The elitists have handy “proof texts” that can be easily twisted to support their claims. The one used the most often is **Hosea 4:6a**, “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*” We have discussed this passage in several other articles, but it is particularly applicable to the Colossian heresy. In fact, it serves as a good alert to the presence of this heresy. If a teacher or preacher cites this verse out of context and claims that it proves Christians are being destroyed because they do not *know* the special information the preacher is peddling, they are promoting a heresy similar to the one in Colossae. Here is why: the passage (properly interpreted) is lamenting that the people do not know **God** in a relational sense. That is clear from **Hosea 4:1**. The people do not know God and consequently do not listen to His word; thus they are destroyed. **Hosea 4:6** has nothing to do with being destroyed by Satan, demons, bad “fate,” or other calamity because of a lack of information that could have protected them. Every elitist teacher who cites this passage out of context claims that the answer is the knowledge they are offering, usually some type of special revelation, secret technique or higher level spiritual experience. If this passage were used properly, it would be pressed upon people to believe the gospel. The reason people are subject to

the hostile powers is because they do not know God. The only way out of that situation is the finished work of Christ on the cross.

The elitists who get rich by promoting the Colossian heresy are using what must be the oldest marketing technique in the world. They convince people they have a big problem or need, and then convince them that the teachers in question have the best or only solution. That is how one makes a sale. The elitists are never satisfied with the gospel, if they preach it at all. The gospel is free, simple, and cannot be bought or sold. If people really believed that Christ has done it all, that if they know Him their future is secure, and that nothing more is needed but walking out the Christian life by the means of grace God has provided, then the elitists would have nothing to offer. They would either have to repent and spend their time nurturing the flock in the faith by expounding the whole counsel of God or go out of business. Elitists rarely repent because they are getting rich and famous peddling their bondage disguised as the secrets to success. Those who warn the flock about these deceptions are branded “heresy hunters” or threatened with the imminent wrath of God for “touching God’s anointed prophets” who claim special elite status. All Christians are equally anointed. Only Christ is specially anointed.²

SPIRITUAL HIERARCHY

Elitism often takes on an ecclesiastical form. Those who claim elite status also claim special offices that put them above ordinary Christians. In so doing they fail to emphasize the authority of Scripture and priesthood of every believer because if they did, again they would have no “corner on the market.” So they set up a spiritual hierarchy and define themselves as on the upper rungs. Just once I would like to hear, “There is a special category of Christians, who because of powerful anointing, special selection by God to have revelatory experiences, and a superior walk to ordinary Christians, have entered the ‘higher place,’ but,

sadly I am not one of them.” Every teacher who posits a higher level, elite class of Christians, defines himself as part of it. Suspicious? Some are a little more coy about it. For example, consider the “apostle” mentioned in an earlier CIC article whose proof of apostleship is that “prophets” told him.³ Groups of elitists get together in inner circles and agree to promote one another’s claims to superiority.

Consider Paul’s three warnings in Colossians 2: do not be carried away as plunder; do not let anyone disqualify you; do not let them act as your judge. No human teacher has the right to declare those whom Christ has chosen, justified and cleansed to be “lesser” than themselves in any regard. We are brothers and sisters and from the apparent least to the apparent greatest. We all stand because of the finished work of Christ and for no other reason. There is no hierarchy, and there is no “trickle-down” spirituality where the elite rise to such blissful heights that some of their “anointing” reaches us poor wretches who have no clue.

These elitists find followers because, at the heart of it, we all know we are not what we should be. The more honest we are, the more we know that we are indeed “wretched” (**Romans 7:24**). We are not yet glorified, and as long as we are on this side of the future glory, we shall live with things in us that are not what we wish. We live in a sin-cursed world, and we are all the more disturbed by it because we know God and have tasted of His holiness. No Christian family is perfect, no Christian church is pristine and untainted by the sins and difficulties of life, and no human body is truly and perfectly healthy. There are always problems and will be until Christ returns. The elitists **appear** to have transcended it all because of some special experience or status. They surely look good on TV. They are not what they seem. If they were honest they would assure us that they are no different than the rest of us, sinners saved by grace, if indeed they do know the Lord.

When others challenged Paul’s legitimate apostolic position, he chose

to refer to his weaknesses (see **2Corinthians 12**). They boasted in visions, but although Paul had visions, he boasted in his weakness that made him constantly dependent on the grace of God. All Christians are cut out of the same bolt of material, the Adamic race. But for the grace of God, we would be headed for hell and unconcerned about our lost condition. Having been apprehended by God's sovereign grace, we have no reason to either suggest we have some elite position, nor place ourselves under others who make such claims.

So much modern theology emphasizes man's abilities and supposed free will it is not surprising that we have so much of the Colossian heresy around us. If the main point is human ability and making the right choices, then clearly there are those who are far better at that than others. Having arrived at a better situation because of their choices, they now can tell the rest the "secret" of their success. How much better it would be if we realized that if it were not for God's continually keeping us by His grace, we would certainly and immediately fall into every manner of sin. That thought would give us something to daily praise God about. Even if we do sin, God's grace will pull us out of it and set us back on His paths.

LEGALISTS AND ASCETICS

As we saw in the previous CIC article, part of the problem in Colossae was asceticism. The idea is that self-denial can create a higher level spiritual situation.

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no

value against fleshly indulgence.

(Colossians 2:20-23)

Today these matters still "appear" to be pious and exemplary. This version of elitism will be around until Christ returns. It has never disappeared in church history. There are always those who can be convinced that if they have stricter rules, dietary laws, or some other version or rigorous self-denial, they can get closer to God. It is noteworthy that Paul says that there is no reason to submit to these because we have died with Christ to the *stoicheia* (elementary principles). As mentioned in the previous issue of CIC, there were pagan rituals that required strict adherence to such rules as preparation for "entering" the temple to undergo initiation rites. There were also Judaizers who delighted in demanding adherence to Mosaic Law.

We need not restrict Paul's warning to any particular kind of legalism or asceticism. It applies to any that arise at any time in history from any source. One cannot escape the hostile powers, better his fate or destiny, or get closer to God by the means of following man-made rules. The idea is that one can "ascend" to a higher place by such practices. Here is what Paul said elsewhere: *"even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:5,6)*. As taught also in Colossians, Christ is already high above all authority and power. This passage says that by grace God seated us there with him, *"even when we were dead in transgressions."* We did not get into this high position because of being very strict in following someone's rules. We did not get there by keeping the Old Testament law. We were put there by God's sovereign grace. Therefore, *"self-abasement and severe treatment of the body"* cannot move us "up" the spiritual ladder. We are already seated with Christ in the highest place.

Given the spiritual climate of Ephesus and Colossae, Paul is likely countering any idea that Christians are still under the sway of the *stoicheia*.

People living in convents and taking "oaths of poverty" cannot thereby get one iota closer to God if they even know Him at all. Early in church history, after Constantine popularized Christianity, people fled into the desert to seek escape from the corrupting influences they saw around them. However, what they found was that the old sinful self came out there with them.⁴ Paul said that however pious such strict religious practices may seem, they *"are of no value against fleshly indulgence."*

Very early in my Christian life I was taken in by this kind of teaching. I tried my very hardest to be the best Christian I could. I was either fasting or feeling guilty about not fasting. I was trying to force myself to pray more and more, day and night. Anything that seemed desirable, I felt the need to give up. I loved football and tried so very hard to give up watching it and not let any thoughts about football teams enter my mind. I gave up all the music I liked. I gave up all TV. I labored to be the best "Christian" in Bible college. The whole sad experiment ended in dismal failure. I was trying to get closer to God and be a great man of God. What actually happened was that after seven months of this, I became so angry and judgmental of all the "lesser" Christians around me (whom I called "carnal" simply for going about normal life) that I was actually robbed of the basic fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, etc. All my "higher" level Christian living turned out to be as "carnal" as any of those I looked upon as lesser. God kindly brought me back to His grace and mercy, where there is everlasting joy.

There are deliverance teachers who teach legalism and tell their followers that if they sin or do not follow strict rules, demons will enter them. The proof is the strange manifestations that happen as the demons are expelled and the stories of those who are delivered. This idea goes way back in church history. Tertullian claimed that demons had inhabited a Christian because of going to the Roman theater.⁵ The proof was what the demon said upon being expelled: "And in truth I did it most righteously, for I found her in my

domain.”⁶ Tertullian argued that any sort of pleasure in this life would likely put the Christian in the devil’s domain.⁷

This becomes very cruel, actually. For example, consider someone struggling with over-eating who goes to have a demon of gluttony cast out. When such a person gives in to cravings and over-eats, the demon is supposed to have been let back in, and more deliverance is needed. This is no exaggeration — there are worse abuses out there. As noted before, the Colossian heresy is ubiquitous in our day and takes every form imaginable. The only antidote is what Paul taught so powerfully in Colossians 1 and 2 about Christ and what He has done for us on the cross.

BEWARE OF “SECRETS”

Another key to spotting the Colossian heresy is the word “secret.” The truth is open, public, and free. Paul wrote, “*For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God*” (2Corinthians 2:17). In the same epistle Paul also said, “[B]ut we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2Corinthians 4:2). This does not mean that preachers cannot be supported, Paul said elsewhere that they should be. I also do not think it means that Christian ministries cannot charge a reasonable price for materials they produce. It means that what we have to say or teach must be open, public, clear and sincerely from God’s Word. It must be the faith once for all delivered to the saints. If so, no preacher has a secret to sell, because this is the same Word of God and same faith that has been publicly proclaimed since the days of the apostles.

Yet how often preachers and writers

turn what should be open, public truth into a “secret.” For example, books that offer the “secret” to answered prayer have been around for decades. The suggestion is that you need a secret technique or utterance to get God to do what you want Him to do. This is another version of the Colossian heresy. God loves us and has provided all things for us in Christ. We simply and honestly, using our own words, come to God and ask, knowing we have access to His throne of grace because of the finished work of Christ. There is no hidden “secret” that will make God do what He would not do if we just humbly asked. How sad that something like prayer has become a “secret” to be peddled to make some preacher rich.

Paul says, “*He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*” (Roman 8:32). He did not add, “unless we did not repeat the magic prayer word often enough.” In the same chapter Paul said that we do not know how to pray as we should, so the Holy Spirit prays for us according to the will of God (Romans 8:26,27). We often do not know what God’s will is for us in our situation, but we pray and the Holy Spirit also prays for us. God thereby works out His sovereign purposes as the rest of Romans 8 shows.

Those caught up in the Colossian heresy have no time for God sovereignly working in us to bring us along to glory, with complete assurance that “*all things are working together for the good*” of His elect. Why not? Because if we believed that, then we would not need them and their “secrets” to deliver us from the *stoicheia* and the bad fate that might await. There is no secret to this; it is based on our relationship with God through the cross. The golden chain argument of Romans 8:29,30 shows that all true Christians are glorified and nothing can stop it from happening. So we do not need the elitists and their secrets to success. We need to simply

trust God in all things and in humble obedience walk with Him. There is no secret; just a relationship with the sovereign God of history whose purposes for us cannot be thwarted.

SPIRITUAL WARFARE TEACHINGS

The final category of contemporary versions of the Colossian heresy I will discuss is spiritual warfare teachings. I will not go into great detail about the various teachings since we have published several CIC articles on the topic.⁸ What I will do is relate them to the Colossian heresy. In general, these teachings claim that Christ has not **really** freed us from the domination of hostile powers, but has just **potentially** done so. The idea is that Christ has made it possible to gain freedom, but that it will not happen until we learn how to do warfare. This is exactly what Paul denied in Colossians 2. The targets of the teachers of the “philosophy” were regenerate Christians. The teaching was that they were still under the domination of the *stoicheia* **unless** they did or experienced something more. It is the “something more” that gets us into all the trouble.

Many popular teachers use the “armor of God” metaphor in Ephesians 6 and Paul’s statement that we “wrestle” against principalities and powers as proof of the need of their teachings. As I have pointed out before, the “armor” does not consist of anything more than what we all have in Christ as Christians (the Word of God, faith, salvation, truth, righteousness, etc.). “Putting on” does not mean utterances or secret techniques, it is simply a part of the armor metaphor. For example, one does not have to say “I have the shield of faith, I am holding it now, I am stopping those arrows,” or else the Devil will shoot them down and leave them as a casualty. What one must do is to believe the faith! If we have genuine faith, and continue to trust God on the basis of **the faith** (the definite article is in the Greek, meaning the content of the faith), the shield of faith is fully operational. Likewise, to have the helmet of salvation, we need not go through some

ritual; what is necessary is that we actually have salvation. What Christian could be said to not have the helmet of salvation? "So why did Paul tell us to put it on?" the false teachers ask.

Actually, if we look more carefully at the text we see that Paul is encouraging us about **what we already have**:

Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:14-17)

He tells us to stand firm in the battle with what Christ has provided. We are fully protected and armed for battle. The battle is about the Word of God and our relationship with Him through the gospel. The items are *truth*, *the righteousness* (definite article in the Greek, referring to Christ's righteousness imputed to the believer⁹), *the gospel of the peace* (again definite articles in the Greek, meaning "the peace we have with God because of the gospel"), *the faith* (the objective content which is revealed once for all and which we believe), *the salvation* (which we have in Christ), and *the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God* (Jesus quoted God's word when tempted by Satan).

Clearly, all of what Paul says here is of the essence of what is provided in Christ. Rather than needing some elitist revelator, some secret technique, or some man-made formula to be repeated, we are fully equipped through the finished work of Christ and His provisions for our life in Him. The passage on the armor of God does not support the theories on spiritual warfare that are cur-

rently being promoted today.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear that the Colossian heresy is prevalent in the church today. It is particularly popular among those who are promoting "revival." For example, consider the following excerpts from book titles and descriptions found in a catalogue called "Winds of Fire":

"Journey into the open heavens with this prophetic visionary experience"; "What God wants to do in these last days can only be accomplished in the glory realm"; "Receive advanced prophetic training"; "Journey into the Holy of Holies"; "Unlock the secrets to effective powerful intercession."; "Set your family free from Satan's attacks"; "Open the floodgates of the anointing, learn how to walk in it"; "Discover the most amazing miracles since the apostles"; "The missing ingredient to true intimacy with God!"; "Soar above the clouds of confusion and be carried by the wind of the Spirit to the place of true vision."; "This book is not for everyone. It is for those who are unsatisfied. . ."; "New levels of prayer"; "Wipe out your biggest problems in one day!"; "Discover the secret weapon to effective spiritual warfare"; "Receive fresh revelation on Apostles — God is releasing the Apostolic ministry today!"; "How to hear God more clearly"; "Secrets to effective prayer"; and many others.¹⁰

There is hardly a book in the whole catalog that does not promote the Colossian heresy. Every title promotes elitism, "how-to" spiritual technology, spiritual secrets, "higher order" spiritual experiences, new revelations, or something of this ilk. What a huge deception it is when a heresy that Paul clearly

warns against in the New Testament is now being **promoted** as the key to revival! May God help us flee from this perversion into His gracious provision for us through the sufficiency of Christ.

END NOTES

1. www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/index.htm ; then see issues 63, 54, 48.
2. www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue5.htm "The anointing and the Christian: and <http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue63.htm> "Antichrists and The Antichrist" for thorough discussion of the anointing in the New Testament.
3. See www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue66.htm, "Apostles and Prophets and the Foundation of the Church"
4. Justo L. Gonzalez; *The Story of Christianity, Vol 1*; (Harper/Colins: New York, 1984) 137- 143.
5. Tertullian *The Shows, or De Spectaculis*; chapter 26.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.* Chapters 28, 29.
8. www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue1.htm; www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue2.htm; www.twincityfellowship.com/cic/articles/issue48.htm
9. Lenski Ephesians 670, says of this usage here, "That quality bestowed by God's verdict which acquits us of all sin and guilt and declares us righteous for Christ's sake."
10. Excerpts taken from "Winds of Fire" catalog, P.O. Box 219; Covington, PA 16917; www.windsoffire.com

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