What Was the Colossian Heresy?

For centuries Bible students have tried to identify the particular form of false teaching opposed by Paul in Colossians. In reality, no one knows. The apostle does not name names or explain particulars, since they would have been well-known to the original recipients of the letter, and his greater concern was teaching the correcting truth.

We can, however, piece together the general shape of the heresy by observing Paul’s counterarguments. Growth in historical studies has also provided more understanding of the cultural and religious background of the first few centuries A.D., and this has helped us make sense of the problem in Colossae.

**What is a “heresy”?**

First, a note on the word “heresy.” Heresy has become a loaded and emotional term in our culture. It often conjures up pictures of medieval torture chambers or people burning at the stake. In discussions of the Bible or theological usage it means no such thing. Heresy simply defined means “teaching, doctrine, or practice that is a departure from revealed truth.” Heresies are errors that arise from within, or infiltrate from without, professing Christian ranks.

Keep in mind that every disagreement among Christians does not constitute a heresy. The term refers to departures from the truth in regard to the most important foundational truths of the Bible. Some examples would include the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the fact and meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection, the Bible as the Word of God, and how salvation is received (by faith alone in Christ). Every cult is labeled as such because it denies most or all the biblical teaching on these major issues. On the other hand, denominations are Christian groups that disagree over relatively minor and debatable issues, while they agree on the fundamentals.

Therefore, “the Colossian heresy” refers to the particular brand of serious false teaching that was disturbing the believers in that assembly.

**I. Characteristics of the Colossian Heresy**

**False Teaching Regarding Jesus Christ**

As explained in the introductory article, “Colossians: the ABCs,” a leading characteristic of the false teaching in Colossae is the devaluation of Jesus Christ. This can be seen in the letter in two ways:

1. **Paul’s counterarguments about the supremacy of Christ.** There is nothing taught in Colossians that can’t be found in Paul’s other letters, but in no other passage is there such a forceful and concentrated emphasis on the deity and supremacy of Christ as in Col. 1:15-22. Then in Col. 2:9 Paul asserts the deity of Christ in unmistakable language:

    For in Christ all the fullness of the deity dwells in bodily form.
Who is Jesus Christ? God, says Paul. And not just “partly” God or a “semi-God.” All that is God can be found now and forever incarnate in the Person of Jesus Christ. Paul is clearly trying to make it impossible to misunderstand that Jesus Christ is God and that He is supreme over all things.

2. Clear warnings against deception and encouragements to stay firmly grounded in Christ. Paul expresses his concern that, while the Colossians have begun well in Christ, some of them may have moved away. In explaining the redeeming work of Christ, Paul says the result is that believers can stand “holy in His sight, without blemish, and free from accusation” (1:22), but then adds a disclaimer:

If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. (1:23)

In other words, Paul can confidently state how they stand in the Lord’s eyes providing they haven’t moved on to some other “gospel” than the one Paul teaches.

Positively, Paul expresses his hope and prayer that the Colossians may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (2:2-3)

As stated in the introductory article, the central warning of the letter is 2:8:

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Christ.

Whatever the false teachers were saying, they were clearly devaluing the person and role of Jesus Christ in their doctrines. Paul will not have it, and this letter is a straightforward defense of the position the Lord should have in believers’ minds and hearts.

False Teaching about Religious Practices

Besides the false teachers’ errors about Christ Himself, they also were apparently promoting a definition of spiritual living that was leading people astray. Paul therefore issues direct warnings against being deceived in three categories, which can help us understand what the heresy was about.

1. Warnings against legalism.

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. (2:16)

The essence of legalism is the notion that God’s acceptance is earned and maintained through our behavior; that God’s acceptance is conditional, rather than offered freely through faith in Jesus Christ. The false teachers apparently were telling the Colossians that faith in Christ is not enough, that they must observe the
regulations of the Law of Moses. This is an indicator that at least part of the heresy involved Jewish law-keeping. Any form of “Christ-plus” is to be rejected. It doesn’t matter if it’s “Christ plus good works,” or “Christ plus church activities,” or “Christ plus sacraments.” Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.

2. **Warnings against mysticism.**

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. (2:18)

The false teachers may have claimed to have had “divine visions” as the basis of their authority. Mysticism has been a part of almost all of the world religions, and is basically the attempt to bypass objective truth to gain direct experience of “spiritual reality.” Even in our day many people are impressed by others’ claims of mystical experiences or “inside knowledge.” Don’t be impressed or deceived, Paul says. The truth of God and Jesus Christ have been clearly and publicly proclaimed, and there are no “secret truths” available to some elite group. Such claims only mark the person as arrogant and puffed up with spiritual pride. If you have Christ you have everything you need.

3. **Warnings against asceticism.**

Since you have died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? (2:20-21)

Asceticism has also been practiced in almost all world religions. It is severe self-discipline in external matters in the effort to become “spiritual.” Typical practices include extreme fasting and celibacy. When you consider that most of us wrestle to some degree with self-control, it is not surprising that we are often impressed by the rigorous self-denial of people who do these things. But Paul punctures the illusion:

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (2:23)

Paul exposes these practices for what they are — the attempt to attain spirituality from the outside-in. Outside-in spirituality, however, is a sham. It doesn’t work, because it cannot change the heart. Only through the inside-out work of the Holy Spirit (Christ in us) does real spiritual growth and transformation take place. So don’t be deceived by these practitioners. Paul then goes on in Chapter 3 to explain how we actually live out the work of Christ in our lives. It is through knowing who we are in Christ, and choosing to present our minds and bodies to him for his use.

II. **Insights from Historical Studies.**

As has been explained, no one knows for sure who the false teachers were, or what particular heresy was troubling the believers in Colossae. We can, however, approach a general description of it.

Religions of all kinds could be found in the Roman Empire of the first century. According to Clinton E. Arnold,
The Christians at Colossae lived in an environment of religious pluralism. They coexisted with people who worshipped Anatolian, Persian, Greek, Roman, and Egyptian deities and with Jews who were devoted to the worship of one god and the observance of Torah. The manner of devotion and religious expression was quite varied among the different groups.

Just as in our time, the dominant religious attitude was Syncretism, the selecting and blending of religious ideas into new forms according to one’s wishes. Someone has called these “designer religions.” The Colossian error seems to have mixed Christian, Jewish, Greek, pagan, and mystical elements into its scheme.

1. **Comparisons to Gnosticism**

   For a long time, scholars assumed that the Colossian error was some form of Gnosticism. Today, that idea has been discounted, because it has become clear that fully developed Gnosticism did not come into being until the 2nd and 3rd centuries. But even so, the tendencies that later became Gnosticism were there long before, so it remains a helpful comparison.

   The word Gnosticism comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge.” A Gnostic, therefore, means “one who knows,” or “someone in-the-know.” The essence of Gnosticism was the pursuit of secret knowledge that could only be revealed to the elite. Typically, this “knowledge” involved the view that only “spirit” is pure good, and that the natural world — creation itself, and especially the human body — is a corruption, an illusion, or positively evil. The Gnostic hoped to escape the prison of the body through his “knowledge” and by mystically climbing the ladder of heavenly realms. Fully developed Gnosticism, like the error in Colossae, combined ideas from Greek philosophy, Eastern religions, Judaism, and Christianity.

   These groups often claimed Jesus as the true Teacher of Gnosticism. They distinguished between his public teaching followed by ordinary Christians, and the deeper “secret teaching” revealed only to his disciples, now passed down to the Gnostics. Some Gnostic writings containing these “secret teachings” still exist (the so-called “Gospel of Thomas” is an example). Occasionally these writings make a splash in the media, being presented as “new discoveries about the origins of Christianity.” The media like to play up the sensational aspect of these “discoveries,” but scholars know they are no such thing. They are corruptions of genuine Christianity that arose 100-200 years after Christ.

   Like the later Christians felt when confronted by Gnostics, the believers in Colossae likely were intimidated and confused by the heresy they encountered. There is a seductive quality about those who claim “higher knowledge,” especially when it’s backed up by impressive-looking self-discipline. Eugene Peterson writes,

   "The gnostic line is quite convincing when we first come across it. There is an ascetical earnestness and mystical intensity that catches our attention. Because these people seem to be so deeply concerned about the inner life and to know so much more than anyone else about the graduate levels of spirituality, we are attracted and want to know more.

   But Paul exposes this illusion, pointing out that while they have “an appearance of wisdom,” these are of “no value” because they are detached from Christ (2:23)."
Like the Gnostics, the heretical teachers in Colossae said that the Christian teaching about Christ was false; that there is "secret wisdom and knowledge" you must receive to obtain the "fullness" of spiritual experience. Like a master debater, Paul takes their favorite terms and uses them to assert the truth of his gospel. Notice how he uses those favorite terms of the false system:

Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of WISDOM and KNOWLEDGE. (2:3)

For God was pleased for all his FULLNESS to dwell in him [Christ]. (1:19)

For in Christ all the FULLNESS of the deity dwells in bodily form. (2:9)

And you have been given FULLNESS in Christ. (2:10)

If you have Christ, you have it all; fullness, wisdom, and knowledge are all found in him.

2. A more recent suggestion: Merkabah Mysticism

In recent decades, many scholars have investigated an ancient movement called merkabah mysticism, and noticed its similarities to the Colossian heresy. While again we must point out that no one knows for sure, this ancient religious pursuit might be close to what Paul was combating.

“Merkabah” is the Hebrew word for God’s throne. Merkabah mysticism was a movement where people tried to attain the kind of spiritual vision of God on his throne that was seen by the prophets Isaiah (see Isaiah 6:1-8) and Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 1). They blended those visions from the Hebrew Scriptures and added Gnostic-like concepts of heavenly spheres, each guarded by an angel.

The merkabah mystic believed one had to prepare oneself for this ascent by rigorous fasting and other ascetic practices for many days (some said as many as forty days). Then he had to rise through a hazardous spiritual journey, where he could only gain passage by giving the angels the appropriate passwords (the content of the “knowledge”). Eventually he hoped make his way to the highest sphere and see God on his throne. The typical term these mystics used for the total system of heavenly spheres was pleroma, the Greek word translated “fullness.”

Scholar F. F. Bruce comments on this cult:

It cannot be proved that the Colossian heresy involved an early form of merkabah mysticism, but the heavenly ascent implied in Col. 2:18 appears to have been of the same character as the experience which the merkabah mystics sought. The Colossian heresy evidently encouraged the claim that the fullness of God could be appreciated only by mystical experiences for which ascetic preparation was necessary.

As Bruce indicates there are remarkable parallels between this ancient cult and the errors attacked by the apostle Paul in Colossians.

Conclusion
While it can’t be proven that the Colossian error was this particular brand of religious practice, it is still instructive for illustrating the kind of world the Colossian believers lived in. While the names and language are different, it is also remarkably like our own.

We too live in a world of religious syncretism. Every day on television, radio, and movies we can hear people who are certainly religious, but their religion is a do-it-yourself blend of selections from several religions and practices. National bestseller lists regularly include someone’s latest “discoveries” about spiritual truth. Those celebrities and authors sound so sincere and convincing, but rarely are their ideas solidly biblical. Like the false teachers in Colossae, they have “an appearance of wisdom” (2:23).

*Paul’s Letter to the Colossians* is as relevant to us as it was to his first listeners. The answer is still the same: Christ is God incarnate, supreme Lord over all, and an all-sufficient Savior to anyone who puts their faith in Him. We need go nowhere else.