



Northern Illinois District

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

A Word on the Colossian Heresy

As Paul writes to the church at Colossae, he has a pastoral concern about a heresy, a false teaching, which was brought to his attention by a report issued to him by what was likely Colossae's first pastor, Epaphras. This heresy is tempting Christians away from a true relationship with Jesus. Paul does not name or map out all the details of this false teaching in his letter. However, from the details that Paul does give, here is a brief overview of the Colossian Heresy.

The Colossian Heresy was a rudimentary form of a false teaching called Gnosticism, which was more fully developed from the late second to mid third centuries A.D. While Gnostic beliefs varied depending on the teacher, a few of their basic beliefs were:

1. God is a pure spirit being, so all matter (including human flesh) is inherently evil.
2. Creation of the material world was the work of a "lesser god" who may even be identified with angels.
3. That god's nature was corrupt, so while wanting to create a world that was imperishable and immortal, he failed. Some forms of Gnosticism even identified this "inferior god" with the God of the Old Testament.
4. Gnostics either led very ascetic or debaucherously wild lives.
5. Redemption involved the escape of one's spirit from the material world to be unified with God.
6. Such an escape only comes through obtaining a special, secretive knowledge that only enlightened teachers can impart, and this redemption is realized upon death.
7. Jesus was sometimes identified as the first of such enlightened teachers who himself was redeemed by this secret knowledge path.
8. Those without secret knowledge were either annihilated at death, or eternally punished, or reincarnated until they came to this knowledge.
9. Jesus' Incarnation was often either neglected or denied in their teaching, and His Death and Resurrection were often seen as something other than historic facts.



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The false teaching which Paul addresses in his letter to the Church at Colossae was a blend of Jewish beliefs and practices, coupled with Christian terminology with Greek philosophic meanings that related to Gnostic teachings. The Colossian Heresy seems to have taught and held to the following points:

1. People were to keep certain Jewish festivals.
2. There were restrictive dietary practices as well as restrictions on even coming into physical contact with certain things.
3. Adherents were to lead an ascetic life which may have seemingly resembled the wisdom of mortifying the sinful nature.
4. In their disdain for the material world, it was taught all males were to be circumcised.
5. There was a fascination, if not even worship, of angels which may also have related to a fascination and worship of forces of nature or cosmic events.
6. There was an emphasis on secretive initiation rituals.
7. Forgiveness in Jesus may have been taught as the first step along the path to the knowledge that truly redeems a person.
8. The false teachers seemed to have favorite terms such as “light” and “truth” to lend credibility to their heresy.

The Colossian Heresy was a religion of self-effort which ultimately (even while paying “lip service” to Jesus as an important figure) denied Jesus as God and Savior. It is likely that the teachers of this heresy sincerely believed their own teachings, but the sincerity of their convictions did not put their teachings on equal footing with the truth revealed in God’s Word as proclaimed by the Apostle Paul’s ministry. As you participate in this study, be looking for how Paul overwhelms the false teaching of the Colossian Heresy with the saving truth of the Gospel.