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—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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The Colossian Heresy and the Sufficiency of Scripture

Kevin T. Bauder

The heresy in Colosse was an odd mixture. On the one hand, it contained elements of incipient Gnosticism. Apparently the Colossians were talking about Gnostic categories like *Sophia*, *Gnosis*, *Eons*, and the *Pleroma*. On the other hand, this heresy also contained Judaizing elements, primarily evidenced by an effort to introduce Old Testament forms into the New Testament worship.

Paul wrote to the Colossians in order to refute this heresy. His refutation consisted largely in a focus upon the person and work of Christ. By explaining clearly Who Christ was and what He had done on the cross, Paul was able to cut the ground out from under both the Judaistic and the Gnostic elements of the heresy.

While both sides of the heresy relied upon some form of tradition, the Gnostic side was more creative in its forms of worship than the Judaistic side. The Judaizers restricted themselves to importing the Old Testament patterns into the church. The Gnostics, however, simply made up their worship as they went. In order to get the complete picture, one needs to consult the church father Hippolytus, who describes Gnostic rites in more detail than anyone really wants to read. Hippolytus depicts different branches of Gnosticism, some of which went to extremes of asceticism and others of which went to extremes of libertinism. So bizarre are his descriptions that Hippolytus has been accused of fabrication, but the evidence of the Nag Hammadi documents appears to

corroborate his testimony. Irenaeus and Tertullian also offer confirming evidence.

The multiple versions of Gnosticism all had one thing in common. Their worship was sheer invention, employing sophisticated and often bizarre rites that were nowhere authorized in the New Testament. Granted that the Colossian heresy represented an early version of Gnosticism, no one doubts that it incorporated at least some of the liturgical inventions that characterized later Gnostic worship.

For the Christians at Colosse, this heresy created a double problem. First, it introduced doctrines that were nowhere authorized in the Scriptures or the apostolic teaching (though these did not always explicitly contradict revealed teaching). Second, it introduced rites of both Judaistic and Gnostic origin that had no basis in the apostles' doctrine.

Paul opens the second chapter of his epistle to the Colossians by asserting that all the treasures of wisdom (*sophia*) and knowledge (*gnosis*) are found in Christ. *Sophia* and *Gnosis* were both code words within the Gnostic heresy; Paul is here co-opting those terms for Christ Himself. With respect to spiritual things, no true wisdom or knowledge can be found outside of Christ. Paul warns the Colossians against being deluded by pithy arguments (v. 4). Furthermore, he commands them to walk in Christ "as you received Him," in other words, as Christ was announced and taught through the apostolic witness (v. 6).

Verse 8 issues a caution to beware of people who want to carry Christians into spiritual captivity (a clear reference to the heretics of Colosse). This captivation can take three forms. The first is through "philosophy and empty deceit," by which Paul means philosophical and theological speculations that carry them beyond the warrants of revelation. The second is "human traditions," or rites, forms, and customs that people have made up for themselves. This is a reference to the Gnostic side of the heresy and its invented liturgies. The third is the "elements of the world," an expression that is connected in Galatians with the transmission of Judaistic forms into Christian observance. In other words, Paul warns that when doctrine and order go beyond what is revealed, this excess reduces Christians to captivity—whether the imported teachings and customs arise from deceitful speculation, from human invention, or from Judaistic retention.

In verse 9 Paul states his reason for restricting faith and order to what is revealed. The reason is that the entire fullness (*pleroma*) of the Godhead dwells in Christ bodily. This is a direct attack upon the Gnostic system, for which the Pleroma was the series of divine emanations or Eons. Paul asserts that Christ Himself contains the entire Pleroma, and this implies that Christians are complete (the term is *pleroma* turned into a verb) in Him. In other words, Christians need nothing and can have nothing outside of Christ, Who is the Head of all principality and power (two key Gnostic terms that denote spiritual authorities).

The upshot of Paul's argument is that all spiritual authority resides in Christ. This fact comes to bear upon the problem of both Gnostic and Judaistic forms of worship. It is not necessary that those forms be directly forbidden within special revelation. Since Christ is the center and sum of spiritual authority, then He alone can authorize the doctrines that Christians must believe and forms that Christians must employ in worship.

In fact, Christ has completely triumphed over every other pretender to spiritual authority (v. 15). This is most likely a reference to the resurrection, and is parallel to the assertion in Ephesians 4 that Christ "led captive a captive multitude." He has completely vanquished and despoiled every

alternative spiritual authority, and His resurrection evidences His complete triumph. No one and nothing can be set alongside Christ as the absolute master of all things spiritual.

What this means for the individual Christian is that no one but Christ has the authority to bind the conscience (vv. 16-17). Only He has the power to forbid or to command. No mere human has authority to establish moral standards for any Christian. Only Christ can do that. Church authority consists only in the announcing of the standards that Christ has revealed.

By the same token, no human has the right to introduce new forms of worship (v. 18). Here Paul mentions specifically the Gnostic habit of humbling one's self before the eons or angels, rendering veneration to them. We must not suppose, however, that Paul intends merely to forbid this one custom. On the contrary, he bases his exclusion of this custom upon the supremacy of Christ, Who alone has the authority to impose patterns of worship. He notes that humans lack not only the authority, but also the knowledge to specify how they ought to behave in the face of things they have not seen. He implies that a person who supposes that he can please God by introducing new worship on his own initiative is "vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind." To take such a direction is to reject (fail to hold firmly to) the Head, namely, Christ.

In verses 20-23, Paul is evidently viewing both the Judaistic and Gnostic sides of the heresy together. He presupposes that in Christ believers have died to the elements of the world (probably a reference to the old Jewish rituals). Why, then, would Christians ever subject themselves to decrees that have been authorized by mere human beings?

As we have seen in the context, these decrees work in two ways. Some decrees restrict the individual Christian where Christ does not. Other decrees authorize forms of worship that Christ does not. Paul sees these as two results of the same abysmal heresy. He denounces both results as will-worship, or as the assertion of the depraved human self against the authority of Christ. Such ordinances, he declares, are utterly without spiritual value. There is no redemptive quality to them, however wise they may appear to be.

This passage contains two enduring lessons.

Lesson One: We do not have freedom to make up moral rules for other Christians. If a thing is not revealed in or cannot be soundly inferred from the Word of God, then it cannot be a matter of binding morality.

Lesson Two: We do not have freedom to make up our own worship. If a custom or practice is not revealed in or cannot be soundly inferred from the Word of God, then it must not be introduced as an element of worship.

To reject either of these lessons is to assault directly the Lordship of Christ. Paul does not grant the Colossians permission to retain any elements of Judaistic or Gnostic ritual on their own initiative. On the contrary, he restricts the faith and order of the Colossian church to those doctrines, customs, prescriptions, rites, and elements that are authorized by Christ Himself through the apostolic testimony. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Not All the Blood of Beasts

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain
Could give the guilty conscience peace
Or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heavenly Lamb,
Takes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name
And richer blood than they.

My faith would lay her hand
On that dear head, of Thine
While like a penitent I stand
And there confess my sin.

My soul looks back to see
The burden Thou didst bear
When hanging on the cursed tree
And knows her guilt was there.

Believing, we rejoice
To see the curse remove;
We bless the Lamb with cheerful voice
And sing His bleeding love. ✠

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