

Paul's Epistle to the Colossians

Introduction

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I. Introduction:

Along with Paul's epistle to the Colossians, his letters to the Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon are sometimes called "the prison epistles". That is because they were written by him from Rome during his first imprisonment there in ca. 55-57 A.D. (Phil.1:13; 4:22). This we know both from the book of Acts and from the internal evidence found in these four epistles.

(30) Then Paul dwelt *two whole years* in his own rented house [at Rome], and received all who came to him, (31) preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

Acts 28:30-31 NKJV

I, therefore, *the prisoner* of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.

Ephesians 4:1 NKJV

(19) And [pray] for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, (20) for which I am an ambassador *in chains*; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Ephesians 6:19-20 NKJV

Just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both *in my chains* and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace.

Philippians 1:7 NKJV

(13) . . . so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that *my chains* are in Christ; (14) and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by *my chains*, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Philippians 1:13-14 NKJV

. . . meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also *in chains*.

Colossians 4:3 NKJV

Aristarchus *my fellow prisoner* greets you.

Colossians 4:10a NKJV

This salutation by my own hand – Paul. Remember *my chains*. Grace be with you. Amen.

Colossians 4:18 NKJV

Paul, *a prisoner* of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer.

Philemon 1:1 NKJV

. . . yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also *a prisoner* of Jesus Christ.

Philemon 1:9 NKJV

Epaphras, *my fellow prisoner* in Christ Jesus, greets you.

Philemon 1:23 NKJV

Although he was imprisoned, Paul nevertheless did not slack off from his apostolic ministry. He made a point not only of praying diligently for his charges (Eph.1:18; 3:16-17; Phil.1:4; Col.1:3; 1:9), but also did his best to keep up with them through the visits of believers who came to Rome (2Tim.1:16-17; cf. Phil.2:26), and of course through writing letters which some of these visitors and also some of those of his circle were deputized to deliver (Rom.16:1; cf. 2Cor.12:17-18; 2Tim.4:12). So while Paul himself was imprisoned for several years, the Word of God certainly was not (2Tim.2:9). Not only did his ministry not cease because of this interlude; it was no doubt in no small part because of his imprisonment that Paul had the time to devote to writing and that the necessity arose for him to do so in order to continue to minister to these churches. And as a result today we have these four blessed epistles.

"But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it (i.e., Joseph's sale into bondage and imprisonment) *for good*, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive."

Genesis 50:20 NKJV

We know a good deal about Paul's experience in Philippi (Acts 16:11-40; 20:6; 1Thes.2:2) and about his ministry at Ephesus (Acts 18:19-21; 19:1-41; 1Cor.15:32; 16:8; 2Tim.1:18), primarily because of the Luke's treatment of these events in the book of Acts. But at the time of writing of this epistle, Paul had never visited the church at Colossae. That city was located on the Lycus river, a tributary of the river Maeander (from which the English verb "meander") in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). It was situated inland roughly a hundred miles to the east of the coast of

the Aegean sea and the city of Miletus (where the Maeander emptied into the Latmian gulf), and was not far from the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col.4:13). To the west, some 150-200 miles or so were the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe which Paul and Barnabas had visited and evangelized during the "second missionary journey" (Acts 13:13-14:26; 16:1-2).

(6) Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. (7) After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. (8) So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas.
Acts 16:6-8 NKJV

None of the likely routes Paul and company took on the "third missionary journey" which brought them eventually into Greece would have passed through the Maeander valley. While there is much we do not know about that great apostle's travels, it seems likely that when he says, at Colossians 2:1, "I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh" (NKJV), it may well indicate that he had never visited that city either, not just the church. But that did not mean that Paul did not have it in his heart to support these believers and to do his best to spur on their spiritual growth (as the verse quoted clearly demonstrates that he did).

In spite of never having been there, it is also clear from the evidence scripture contains that Paul had many contacts with the believers in this area, both in Colossae and also in Laodicea. It certainly also seems as if he had every intention of visiting them and ministering to them as soon as possible once he was released from imprisonment.

But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.
Philemon 1:22 NKJV

Philemon was one of the Colossian believers as we know from the fact that both Archippus (Col.4:17; Philem.1:2) and Onesimus (Col.4:9; Philem.1:10), on whose behalf Paul wrote the letter to Philemon, are mentioned in both epistles. And Onesimus, as we know from reading Philemon, had apparently run off to Rome to join Paul. Paul sent him back, commending him to Philemon and asking him to manumit his run-away slave as a favor to Paul. It is very likely then that Onesimus accompanied Tychichus, the probable bearer of both the letter to Philemon and the one to the church at Colossae as well, on the journey from Rome back to Asia Minor. Whether or not they were joined by anyone else from Paul's circle we are not told, but it says much about Paul's care and concern for the Church of Jesus Christ that he went to such lengths to see that those who had been led to the Lord through his ministry even indirectly (in their case through Epaphras: Col.1:7; 4:12; who had also been imprisoned for his faith: Philem.1:23), did not lack for continuing instruction in the Word of God so that they might sustain their spiritual growth.

Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of

God.

Colossians 4:12 NKJV

This attitude on Paul's part backed up by consistent prayer and deliberate action, is the opposite of what one usually finds in our contemporary Laodicean "fire and forget" witnessing and evangelism. Leading people to Christ is wonderful, commanded and commended by scripture, but we who pay attention to the Bible understand that this is not enough to guarantee their ultimate salvation, inasmuch as "once saved, always saved" is the devil's own lie.

"Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away."
Luke 8:13 NIV

Faith without roots often falters under pressure, and it is only through the substantive teaching of the Word of God, believed and treasured and diligently applied by those who receive it, that faith grows strong enough to endure the trials, temptations and tribulations of this life. Paul understood that and made it his top priority to see that no group of believers of whom he was personally aware or to whom he was in any way connected "went without" when it came to the nourishment that the truth of the Bible can provide – even when he had never had occasion to visit them in person.

(8) First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. (9) God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you (10) in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. (11) I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – (12) that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

Romans 1:8-12 NIV

This mutual support is what the Church of Jesus Christ is all about – at least it should be. We are all gifted by the Spirit and we are all assigned ministries by our Lord with the purpose of building up His Body, His Bride, His Church (1Cor.12:4-7). Never has it been more important or incumbent upon the "Church militant" to follow Paul's great example made manifest in the epistle to the Colossians and to live up to our collective responsibility in caring for each other and helping each other to prepare for what is soon to come, for the day is drawing near.

(24) And let us pay careful attention to [ourselves and to] one another with the purpose of stirring up our love [for Christ and each other] and [resultant] good works [of growth, progress and production], (25) not abandoning the assembling of yourselves as some have made it their practice to do [and which makes this impossible], but rather encouraging each other [to persevere in this work of the Lord], and doing so to an ever greater degree to the extent that you see *the day [of the Lord] drawing [ever] closer*.

Hebrews 10:24-25

II. The Date and Occasion of Colossians

A. Paul's Ministry

1. The Course of Paul's Apostolic Ministry prior to Colossians

(3) As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. (4) He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (5) "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. (6) "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Acts 9:3-6 NIV

Few believers have had the sort dramatic epiphany that Saul of Tarsus experienced on the road to Damascus when Jesus Christ appeared to him in glory (Acts 9:1-13; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). But it is also true that few believers have been called upon to endure as much as our Lord's personally chosen twelfth apostle had to suffer in the prosecution of his special ministry.

(15b) "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. (16) I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Acts 9:15b-16 NIV

As Paul tells king Agrippa and those assembled to hear his defense at Caesarea, "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven" (Acts 26:19b NIV), and while all of Christ's apostles "shared the sufferings of Christ" (1Pet.4:13; cf. Rom.8:17; 2Cor.1:5; Phil.1:29-30; 3:10; Col.1:24), Paul uniquely had to endure far more than any other believer is recorded in scripture to have suffered.

(23) These men are servants of Christ? I must be deranged to say so. But even if that is their claim, mine is stronger. I have served through severe difficulties, too numerous to mention. I have been imprisoned too often to recount. I have been beaten excessively, and have often been in danger of losing my life. (24) On five occasions I received from the Jews the "thirty-nine lashes". (25) On three others I was beaten with the [Roman] lictor's rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked – once left to float in the water for an entire day and night. (26) I am constantly journeying and continually in danger – dangers from river-crossings and dangers from bandits, dangers from my own people and dangers from all other nationalities, dangers in cities and dangers in the country, dangers on the sea and dangers from pseudo-Christians. (27) My lot has been one of laboring and toiling, often doing without sleep, of going hungry and thirsty, and often lacking any sustenance whatsoever, of braving the cold, though lacking adequate clothing – (28) and on top of all these external things there is this pressing concern I constantly feel for all the churches.

2nd Corinthians 11:23-28

And the above was merely Paul's short list of trying experiences (cf. 1Cor.4:8-13; 2Cor.1:3-11; 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-33; Gal.4:13; 5:11; 6:17; Phil.1:12-14; 1:29-30; 3:7-11; Col.1:24;

1Thes.2:2; 3:3-4; 2Tim.1:8; 1:12; 3:11; 4:6-9; 4:16-18; *et passim* in the book of Acts). No one ever did more to advance the Church of Jesus Christ – and no one was ever more fiercely opposed by the evil one as a result – as is clear from the ferocity of the opposition Paul continually faced and evident in all these many trials he endured.

For we wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, did, again and again – but Satan blocked our way.

1st Thessalonians 2:18 NIV

And on account of my superabundant revelations, for this reason (lest I become puffed up beyond measure) I was given a stake in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to batter me, that I might not become puffed up beyond measure.

2nd Corinthians 12:7

Paul wrote Colossians from captivity, after all, as "a prisoner of Christ" (Eph.3:1; 4:1; Phil.1:12-14; 1:9-10; 1:13). It is thus important to keep in mind while engaging in this brief summary of his exemplary ministry all of the opposition and suffering he had to overcome in carrying it out.

(17) Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." (18) Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, (19) and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

Acts 9:17-19 NIV

The above events happened very soon after Steven's martyrdom in ca. 33-34 A.D. (Acts 7:60; cf. Acts 8:1; 22:19-20). At some point after his conversion and before his first visit to Jerusalem as a believer three years later, Paul tells us that he went "into Arabia" during the intervening time.

(15) But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased (16) to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. (17) I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. (18) Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.

Galatians 1:15-18 NIV

The word "Arabia" in antiquity had a much more generalized meaning that is the case today and could potentially cover the northern and eastern hinterlands of Syria all the way down to and including Sinai (cf. Gal.4:25). Importantly for our purposes it included the nether regions of present day Syria to the east and south of Damascus wherein there were a number of towns with significant Jewish communities. One such place, Gamla ("the camel", about seven miles from present day Katzrin in Israel), was only 80-90 miles away from Damascus, a few days journey at most. Gamla had a major Jewish synagogue at this time (which has now been excavated by

archeologists), along with an almost all Jewish population of Pharisaic-Hasidic affinity. This community would surely have possessed the entire Bible, in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and we can also safely assume that texts would have been available for purchase in the marketplace. So this or another such town in the outlying regions of Damascus would have been fine places for Paul to seek solitude for the spiritual preparation necessary before engaging in the ministry to which he had been called. It was also a place where he could access the written Word of God in full, something that was important for this great man of God to be doing daily throughout his life.

Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come – and the books,
especially the parchments.
2nd Timothy 4:13 NKJV

Paul's vagueness about the particulars of his post-salvation sequestration and Luke's omitting of it from his narrative is probably on purpose. For whatever reason (and we could imagine a number of them), he didn't wish to name the specific place (or places) that hosted him during the time of quiet preparation he spent there. Just exactly how long he devoted to this course of study is unclear but it probably consumed the bulk of the "after three years" of Galatians 1:18. According to Acts 9:19, Paul spent "some days" in Damascus before his departure to Arabia, then on his return he immediately began proclaiming Jesus Christ in the synagogues of Damascus (Acts 19:20).¹ That means, according to Paul's practice in describing these sequential events, three years *after his conversion* (just as "after fourteen years" in Galatians 2:1 means fourteen years *after his conversion* in A.D. 33/34).

(26) And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. (27) But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. (28) So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out. (29) And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. (30) When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.
Acts 9:26-30 NKJV

(17) "Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance (18) and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' (19) So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. (20) And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' (21) Then He said

¹ This interlude is not mentioned by Luke and must be inserted into his narrative at some point in Acts 19. The three major possibilities are 1) in the middle of verse nineteen; 2) between verses nineteen and twenty; and 3) following verse twenty-two. Possibility #2 seems to this writer the most likely, with the adverb "immediately" meaning then, "immediately [after his sojourn in Arabia]".

to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.' "
Acts 22:17-21 NKJV

(19) "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, (20) but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance."
Acts 26:19-20 NKJV

(18) Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. (19) But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.
Galatians 1:18-19 NKJV

The four passages above all detail Paul's first visit to Jerusalem after being saved. This would have taken place in ca. 36/37 A.D., three years after his conversion (Gal.1:18). In all of these early events, we see Paul's absolute dedication to the Lord, fearlessly proclaiming Jesus Christ in Damascus to the point of having to flee for his life (Acts 9:23-26; 2Cor.11:22-23; cf. Acts 26:21), and then doing the same with the same result in Jerusalem thereafter (Acts 9:28-30; 22:17-21). Paul's desire for his fellow Jews to be saved was a lifelong preoccupation (Rom.9:1-3; 11:13-14), one that caused him severe difficulties (Acts 20:22-23; 21:3-4; 21:10-14)², but our Lord's main purpose for him was to bring the good news to the gentiles (Acts 9:15; 13:46-48; 14:27; 15:12; 21:19; 22:21; 26:17-18; Rom.1:5; 1:13-14; 11:13; 15:15-16; Gal.1:15-16; 2:7-9; Eph.3:1; 3:7-8; 1Tim.2:7; 2Tim.1:11), and in this blessed ministry the twelfth and greatest of the apostles excelled abundantly, being in the end also not unfruitful in giving his countrymen every chance for salvation and spiritual growth (as the book of Hebrews attests).³

(29) And he spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Hellenists, but they attempted to kill him. (30) When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.
Acts 9:29-30 NKJV

(21) Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. (22) And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. (23) But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches [lit., "evangelizes"] the faith which he once tried to destroy." (24) And they glorified God in me.
Galatians 1:21-24 NKJV

The Roman province Syria (where Antioch was located) and Cilicia (whose capital city was Tarsus) constituted the ambit of Paul's proclaiming of the gospel for the next few years, no doubt based on his home town of Tarsus, in all likelihood trying to convert Jews to the faith by making

² See "Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews", Introduction, section III, "The Background of Hebrews".

³ See "Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews", Introduction.

contact through the local synagogues as was his later practice.

Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.
Acts 11:19 NKJV

Paul's early evangelizing most probably also did not yet include any systematic attempt to convert gentiles to the faith. The so-called "gentile Pentecost" of Acts chapter ten had not yet occurred, and it was only as a result of the gentile revival in Antioch that the church in Jerusalem sent out Barnabas to aid in the effort of bringing the gospel to the gentiles there and of leading them forward spiritually thereafter through the teaching of the Word of God (Acts 11:20-22).

(23) When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. (24) For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. (25) Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. (26) And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church **and taught** a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.⁴
Acts 11:23-26 NKJV

Paul's second visit to Jerusalem as a believer occurred in ca. A.D. 46/47, following the year-long tenure in Antioch mentioned above (beginning in ca. A.D. 45/46), where he devoted himself to the edification of the church there through his teaching in conjunction with Barnabas. During his tenure there, the church at Antioch sent him together with Barnabas to bring relief to the believers in Jerusalem on account of the famine mentioned at Acts 11:27-30; 12:25.

(1) Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. (2) And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. (3) Yet not even Titus who was with me,

⁴ "Christian" is not the original spelling of this word in any of the three places where it occurs in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1Pet.4:16). In all three cases, this is not a name that believers gave themselves but a condescending term applied to them by unbelievers. The original spelling with a long "e" rather than a long "i", *ChrEstianoι*, meant not "followers of the anointed One", but something akin to "sanctimonious ones" (Greek *chrestos*, χρηστός, often meaning "good" or "moral" in Hellenistic Greek). Later scribes changed the spelling to comport with the practices of the early church-visible. Widespread adoption of the term "Christian" may be as late as the third or fourth century A.D. In his article, "Chrestianoι / Christianoι" in *Hermes*, vol. 30.3 (1895) pp. 465-470, F. Blass demonstrated that the earlier (correct) form is the only one found to occur in many archaic Christian grave steles; see also the BDF grammar 5.2, fn. 3, where it is demonstrated that the word "Christian" is a Latin adjectival formation, suggesting that therefore "Christian" is a transformation of "Chrestian" (cf. Suetonius' use of the word "Chrestus" in place of Christ, *Div. Claud.* 25).

being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. (4) And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), (5) to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. (6) But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man – for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me. (7) But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter (8) (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), (9) and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (10) They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

Galatians 2:1-10 NKJV

The "fourteen years" mentioned above is the time since Paul's conversion (since that is the focal point of his discussion in Galatians), and the "revelation" is the prophecy of coming famine given to the church at Antioch by the prophet Agabus (Acts 11:28), which occasioned the relief mission. Paul emphasizes these things to make it clear to the Galatians that as an apostle in his own right he was not in any way subordinate to the Jerusalem leadership, and adds the information about his interaction with James, Peter and John to likewise demonstrate that there was no friction on these doctrinal issues between the apostles themselves. Rather, all effort to promote legalism came from outside of the circle of the apostles – to which efforts to pervert the gospel Paul never gave in: "to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you (Gal.2:5 NKJV). Even at this early time, we see that Paul's understanding of the gospel was grace-based and anti-legalistic from the very start.

(2) As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." (3) Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

Acts 13:2-3 NKJV

Thus began what has come to be called "The 1st missionary journey" in ca. 48 A.D. (Acts 13:1-14:28). Paul and Barnabas carried the gospel to Cyprus first and then to the interior of Asia Minor, where the Spirit produced a miraculous response as many gentiles turned to the Lord most notably in the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. Paul and company experienced mass conversions, accomplished many astounding miracles, and faced fierce opposition from the evil one and his human agents (as all serious readers of the Bible will remember), with Paul even being stoned at Lystra. But these events marked the inception of God's plan to bring the good news of salvation to the gentiles for the filling up of the Church of Jesus Christ.

(15) But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. (16) For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake."

Acts 9:15-16 NKJV (cf. Gal.1:16)

Shortly after Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from this first missionary journey, the battle against legalism came to a head – the very fight which would occupy a good deal of Paul's future efforts in protecting the new Christians, primarily of gentile extraction, from falling into the trap of returning to the shadows of the Law.

(1) And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (2) Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Acts 15:1-2 NKJV

The above took place in ca. 49 A.D. and occasioned what is generally termed "the Jerusalem Council". In their effort to keep the legalistic elements in Jerusalem from compromising the gospel and hindering the evangelizing of the gentiles, Paul and company received no little support from the apostle Peter, whose testimony about the so-called "gentile Pentecost" (Acts 15:7-11; cf. Acts 10:1-48; 11:1-18) was instrumental in convincing the assembled believers of the need to respect God's choice of non-Jews to likewise be incorporated into the Church of Jesus Christ. The result was the famous letter from that church to "To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia" (Acts 15:23), which released them from any obligation to follow the Law apart from refraining from the most vile practices of pagan idolatry, things which any Christian should avoid in any case. In fact, of course, the cross, not any communication from the Jerusalem church, was what had abrogated the Law and relieved all believers, Jewish as well as gentile, from the necessity of any longer following those shadows (Rom.8:1-2; 10:4; Heb.8:13). But the heresy of returning to the Law and its now fulfilled symbolism was one with which Paul, the great apostle of grace, would have to contend to the very end of his life.

(36) Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." (37) Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. (38) But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. (39) Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; (40) but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. (41) And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 15:36-41 NKJV

Thus began what is generally referred to as "The Second Missionary Journey" which took place between ca. 50-51 A.D. Even though it had a somewhat rocky start as we see from the passage above, God worked it all out together for good. Paul and Barnabas were eventually reconciled (cf. 1Cor.9:6), and later on Paul and Mark also became very close in their cooperation in ministry (Col.4:10; 2Ti.4:11; Philem.1:24). In addition, this temporary division sped up the progress of Paul and Silas through Asia Minor and led to the first evangelizing of mainland Greece, whence

the gospel would spread throughout the Roman empire to the west (Acts 16:9-10). It should also be observed that Paul's purpose in setting forth on this second journey was to check up on the spiritual well-being of those with whom they had shared the gospel during their first sojourn in Asia Minor. This is a point of critical importance. The "gospel" in Greek is "the good news", and specifically the good news about the kingdom of God, that is, **all** of the good news about our salvation in Jesus Christ – everything in the Bible, the doctrines of the New Testament illuminating everything in the Old Testament and preparing the saints, all believers, for spiritual growth, for endurance of testing and suffering, and for our own ministry work.

(11) Christ Himself appointed some of us apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (12) in order to prepare all of His holy people for their own ministry work, that the entire body of Christ might thus be built up, (13) until we all reach that unifying [goal] of belief in and full-knowledge of the Son of God, that each of us might be a perfect person, that is, that we might attain to that standard of maturity of the fullness of Christ; (14) that we may no longer be immature, swept off-course and carried headlong by every breeze of so-called teaching that emanates from the trickery of men in their readiness to do anything to cunningly work their deceit, (15) but rather that we may, by embracing the truth in love, grow up in all respects with Christ, who is the head of the Church, as our model. (16) In this way, the entire body of the Church, fit and joined together by Him through the sinews He powerfully supplies to each and every part, works out its own growth for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:11-16

Paul understood absolutely that his job as an apostle was not merely to lead the gentiles to initial salvation but to give them the spiritual ammunition required – through a depth of teaching of the Word of God – to be able to hold onto their faith, to grow in that faith, and to expand and edify each other in the Church of Jesus Christ through their own ministry efforts once they had grown to the point of being able to do so. This dedication to the spiritual well-being of his charges after first being saved characterized Paul's entire ministry and stands in stark contrast to much of the "one and done" evangelistic efforts we see today in modern evangelicaldom. For what good does it accomplish if a person "hears the word and immediately receives it with joy" (Mk.13:20), but thereafter through lack of spiritual growth "has no root", "believes only for a while" and "in time of testing falls away (lit., "apostatizes": Lk.8:13)?

(6) But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you – (7) therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. (8) For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.

1st Thessalonians 3:6-8 NKJV

Paul never took his charges spiritual status for granted. He took their spiritual safety greatly to heart, remembering them constantly in prayer and doing his best through visitation, letters and third party contact to energetically shepherd them by striving for their edification through the truth, a labor of love which was often emotionally and physically draining.

(27) My lot has been one of laboring and toiling, often doing without sleep, of going hungry and thirsty, and often lacking any sustenance whatsoever, of braving the cold, though lacking adequate clothing – (28) and on top of all these external things there is this pressing concern I constantly feel for all the churches.

2nd Corinthians 11:27-28

So while this second journey would expand the Church of Jesus Christ as the first one had done, Paul continued to "water" with the truth those already saved even as he pushed forward with the "planting" of new churches in areas not as yet evangelized.

(9) Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; (10) for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city." (11) And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Acts 18:9-11 NKJV

Throughout the two years or so that Paul and company were away from Antioch, they led many to the faith amid much opposition throughout Macedonia and Greece, in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and, notably, Corinth. As we see in the passage above the Lord gave Paul enough respite in that Greek megalopolis so as to be able to spend sufficient time not only to lead many to Christ but also to lead these new believers to spiritual maturity as well – and to spread the gospel "throughout Achaia" (e.g., Rom.15:26; 2Cor.1:1).

As is evident throughout all of the New Testament epistles, opposition to the gospel and undermining of the faith of new believers came not only from the Judiazers who sought to enslave new converts to the Law but also from devotees of Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism (which two theosophic and syncretic systems are often difficult to disaggregate).⁵ While the opposition of the former group was usually direct and often violent, that of the latter was generally more insidious and less openly obvious, seeking to suborn believers through seductive false teachings (rather than to physically eradicate their teachers). For that reason, no doubt, Luke does not have much to say about that heresy which figures so prominently in the book of Colossians (and elsewhere in all of the New Testament epistles). We do, however, find some indications of similar false doctrines and beliefs in the book of Acts which, if not actually Gnostic in direct worship of and supposed combat with the supernatural (through ascetic and/or libertine behavior), are closely enough related to demonstrate the milieu in which that heresy developed and flourished.

- Simon Magus

(9) Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, (10) and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the

⁵ See especially Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews: Chapter 1, section I.b, Gnosticism, and Peter #39, verse 4 (which includes a detailed coverage of the book of Jude).

Great Power of God." (11) They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery.
Acts 8:9-11 NIV

- Elymas / Bar-Jesus

(6) They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, (7) who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. (8) But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. (9) Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, (10) "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?"
Acts 13:6-10 NIV

- The Athenian Philosophers

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.
Acts 17:18 NIV

- The Sons of Sceva

(13) Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." (14) Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. (15) One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" (16) Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.
Acts 19:13-16 NIV

- The Ephesian Magical Texts

A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.
Acts 19:19-20 NIV

- Paul's Prophecy of Future False Teachers

(19) I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. (20) Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

Act 20:29-30 NIV

The combination of the more direct, physical threat from defenders of the Law, the fact that Luke's narrative was not really designed to go into detail about false and mystic beliefs, and Gnosticism being more of an issue in Asia Minor rather than in Greece proper (where much of Paul's ministry as recorded in the book of Acts took place) explain the apparent absence of discussion in Acts of these heresies, the indirect refutation of which was central to Paul's letter to the Colossians (through directly emphasizing the countervailing and opposing biblical truths; see section II.B below).

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

Acts 18:23 NIV

Thus began Paul's "Third Missionary Journey" (Acts 18:23–Acts 21:16) which took place between ca. 51-53 A.D. We see from the citation above that, true to form, Paul's first objective was to encourage and strengthen the faith of those he had previously led to faith in Christ by seeing to their continued edification through the truth of the Word of God.

(11) I long to see you so that I may impart to you some [fruit from my] spiritual gift to make you [spiritually] strong – (12) that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith [in the truth].

Romans 1:11-12 NIV

Galatia and Phrygia mentioned at the start of the third journey (Acts 18:23) are the same regions Paul and his team had evangelized during the first missionary journey and had revisited during the second one. After seeing to the spiritual health of these believers, Paul branched out into new territory.

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus.

Acts 19:1a NIV

Paul likely took the Via Sebasta from Phrygian Antioch north to Apamea, thence westward down the Meander valley to Ephesus. There he stayed for over two years, teaching the Word in the synagogue there for three months (Acts 19:8), and thereafter for two years in "the lecture hall of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:10), a public portico open to all. It is very interesting to note that although Ephesus was a wealthy city and although some of the new believers were individuals of means (cf. Acts 19:19-20), there was no attempt, and apparently no thought given, to "building a [physical] church". Paul and his team were focused on spiritual rather than material edification.

(1) When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said goodbye and set out for Macedonia. (2) He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people [lit., "having encouraged them through much (teaching of the) word"], and finally arrived in Greece, (3) where he stayed three months. Because some Jews had plotted against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia.

Acts 20:1-3 NIV

This was the beginning of the series of events which resulted in Paul's first imprisonment and journey to Rome (ca. 54-56). Paul was eager to bring to the church in Jerusalem the substantial donation he had solicited from the churches in Greece throughout the previous year or more (2Cor.8:1-24; 9:1-5; esp. 2Cor.8:10; 9:2).

(25) But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. (26) For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. (27) It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things. (28) Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain. (29) But I know that when I come to you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ. (30) Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, (31) that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, (32) that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you.

Romans 15:25-32 NKJV

The welfare of the Jerusalem church had always been on Paul's heart, as he had ever been zealous for the salvation and spiritual growth of all of the Jewish people, desiring some positive response from his countrymen even as he was "the apostle to the gentiles".

(13) I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry (14) in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.

Romans 11:13-14 NIV

(9) James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. (10) All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

Galatians 2:9-10 NIV

In the sequel, we know, of course, that Paul was for the most part disappointed in these hopes. Luke makes no mention in his relating of Paul's arrival in Jerusalem of any response or even gratitude for the offering he had so laboriously collected and meticulously administered. Instead,

to avoid conflict, Paul acceded to the wishes of the legalistic faction there and involved himself in standing surety for a group of young men who had taken a vow, to "join in their purification rites and pay their expenses" (Acts 21:24). This was certainly not the purpose for which the collection had been made. This fateful decision subsequently resulted in Paul's arrest and near assassination. Later, having been transferred from Jerusalem to Caesarea, Paul was kept in custody by the then governor Felix.

When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

Acts 24:27 NIV

When Paul's opponents tried to have him brought back to Jerusalem for trial (in order to have the opportunity to assassinate him), Paul famously appealed to Caesar (as all Roman citizens had the right to do). After a very dangerous and near deadly voyage to Rome (chronicled by Luke in Acts chapter 27), Paul finally arrived in Rome sometime ca. 54/55 A.D.

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.

Acts 28:30 NIV

It was during this time and under these circumstances that Paul wrote the so-called "prison epistles", part of his effort, guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit, to continue tending the sheep entrusted to him in the Church of Jesus Christ in spite of being under arrest as he awaited trial: Philippians, Ephesians, Philemon, and our present topic of study, the book of Colossians.

I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.

Colossians 2:1 NIV

Paul's time in Rome thus began with an error (his travel to Jerusalem in spite of being told not to do it: Acts 20:33; 21:4; 21:11-14); and with a serious compromise (in involving himself in the rituals of the Law despite their being fulfilled by the cross: Acts 21:20-26; Heb.7:18-19; 8:13); following an attack on his life (by those who should have appreciated his mission of mercy: Acts 26:20-21); Paul experienced an extended period of prior imprisonment (Acts 24:27); a perilous journey to his trial in the capital city (Acts 27:1-44); and a further two years of house arrest until he was exonerated and released (Acts 28:30). But all this God worked out together for the good (Rom.8:28), not only for Paul and for the Church of that day, but also for us today who are greatly blessed to have this magnificent epistle filled with God's truth and much sublime knowledge about our dear Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(2) My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, (3) in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:2-3 NIV

B. The Colossian Heresies

(4) "You will surely not die," the serpent said to the woman. (5) "For God knows that on the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God [or "gods"], knowing good and evil."

Genesis 3:4-5

The devil has been suborning and deceiving the human race with his clever lies since the very beginning. Satanic lies are clever, because on the one hand they always contain a grain of truth or can be seen as true when viewed from a myopic and warped perspective which is ignorant of or unwilling to accept the truth. On the other hand, the devil's lies always appeal to the innate arrogance which is basic to all human beings.

Pride comes before destruction,
and an arrogant spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 16:18 CSB

The devil became proud, and in his pride he deceived himself into imagining first that he had no need of God, next that he was like Him and so on an equal basis with Him, and finally and eventually that he would be able to replace Him.⁶ From such insanity – the insanity that arrogance always breeds – came the rebellion which lies behind all creature history and which will only be fully resolved once the brilliant plan of God (of judgment, restoration and replacement in three phases) has run its entire course.⁷

(15) In all your ways you were perfect from the day of your creation until unrighteousness was found in you. (16) In your extensive conspiring, you were filled with wickedness, and you sinned. So I cast you from the mountain of God as one profaned, and I blotted out [your memory] from among the stones of fire, O covering cherub. (17a) ***Your heart became haughty*** because of your beauty, [and so] ***you destroyed your wisdom*** on account of your splendor.

Ezekiel 28:15-17a

The first thing we need to understand about the Gnosticism and legalism – and the blending of the two into a dangerous mystical, toxic brew in Asia Minor at this time – is that all such lies are of the devil. This particular series of attacks on the truth – and therefore on those who ought to love the truth (i.e., believers) – was actually all of one piece, and it was Satan's "piece". Secular

⁶ See SR 4, section IV: "Satan's Tactical Doctrine"; BB 2A: Angelology, section II.7.1: "Satan's System of Propaganda"; BB 3A: Hamartiology, section II.4: "The Distinction between Sin and Evil"; CT 3A, section II.3.c.1: "The persuasiveness of tribulational false teaching"; and Peter #39, section 2: "False Teaching".

⁷ See SR 5: Judgment, Restoration and Replacement; and BB 4B: Soteriology, section I: "God's Plan to Save You".

scholars and all other itching ears will search in vain for consistency or any sort of underlying logic or system in these attacks, for the only common thread here is the satanic attack this hodgepodge of false doctrines represented – and still represents in the church-visible today which is likewise being beset by these same old themes, newly branded as "new age" or "emergent", but just as sinister and as deadly as they were in Paul's day. For that reason alone, studying Colossians is a valuable exercise for us believers who are standing on the cusp of the most deadly assault on faith in world history: antichrist's one world religion. Its seeds, like all false teaching, can be clearly seen in every satanic attack on the truth since the beginning of the human race, starting in the garden, and its particular syncretic metastasis already visible in our day in its incipient forms.

That which has been is what will be,
That which is done is what will be done,
And there is nothing new under the sun.
Ecclesiastes 1:9 NKJV

Interpretations of Colossians which try to be very specific about the nature of the Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism/legalism that was plaguing that early church miss the point. These teachers and teachings were always very murky and resembling shifting shadows, molding themselves to the desires of the moment and of the individuals they sought to entrap – in the same way that all cults operate today. It is not for no reason that many of the more "successful" and well-known cults of our day are loath to share their "truths" with any but the well and long initiated (who have already been thoroughly vetted and ensnared beyond hope of escape). Concealing their mysteries from outsiders and thus enhancing their value through such secrecy (what one cannot have is always more desirable than what is readily available, it seems), has always been a standard cult tactic: promise people the answers to their most burning questions about life and eternity, but never get around to actually giving them those answers (because they actually don't exist apart from God and the Bible).

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.
2nd Timothy 4:3 NIV

All cults understand that telling people what they want to hear, that is, appealing to their hidden desires, is key to winning them over in the first place so as to make them slaves of the cult or system of false teaching thereafter.

(1) Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, " Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (2) The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, (3) but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' " (4) "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. (5) For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God [or "gods"], knowing good and evil."

Genesis 3:1-5 NIV

Herein we see the devil's methodology on full display: questioning the truth ("Did God really say?"); directly opposing the truth with a lie wrapped in a veneer of truth ("You will not certainly die [physically immediately]"); then tempting the wavering victim with a lie so impossibly outrageous that it appeals to an innate, arrogant desire to replace the truth with our own desires ("you will be like God / "gods"). Going to alternative sources for "truth" – as if one has no need of God and His truth – only results in casting oneself into a thicket of lies. Entertaining those lies subtly puts oneself on the same level as God in one's arrogant heart. Accepting those lies disposes a person towards feeling adequate to directly disobey God, to "help" God by doing things one's own way (as if "He" doesn't really understand), and, eventually, to seek to replace Him – just as the devil tried to do and has been trying to do from the beginning. Only by close attention to the truth in sufficient humility and by determined rejection of the lie that beckons to our innate arrogance can a believer keep him or herself safe from this insidious methodology.

(6) I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – (7) which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. (8) But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! (9) As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

Galatians 1:6-9 NIV

(24) "Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, (25) except to hold on to what you have until I come.' "

Revelation 2:24-25 NIV

As we have had occasion to see in the past, all cults and cult-like organizations, groups and individuals follow similar procedures⁸, and we can be sure that the same was true of the farrago of Gnostic, mystic and legalistic cabals and cliques whose false doctrines were threatening the spiritual growth and stability of the Colossian church at this time. All such groups and individuals seek first and foremost to separate their converts from all prior relationships in order to better control them, creating a virtual separate society through such measures as intolerant dogmatism, odd customs, emotional excess, and eventually mandated physical separation; secondly, they preach self-righteousness, flipping the need for having God's righteousness graciously provided through faith in Christ on its head, teaching instead a works-based "goodness" whereby credit is earned through following law or by engaging in other works-based systems, whether ascetic or antinomian; thirdly, they all have their own "secret doctrines" which putatively is the means of attaining spirituality and spiritual advancement, but which, in addition to being false, cannot be checked as the Bible can be; and finally, fourth, while claiming to serve God, in fact they all offer a false substitute for the one true God, worshiping the devil in fact even

⁸ See the study, "Read Your Bible!", under "Cult Characteristics".

as they may liberally intone the name of God and our Savior Jesus Christ. All of these tendencies as well as Satan's three lies can be seen easily enough in the book of Colossians by "reading between the lines" of Paul's vigorous, indirect defense against them. We shall examine that defense in summary form below (and verse by verse in our chapter by chapter treatment of the book), but it would be salutary to note here that these same trends, lies and methods are currently being plied by Satan's disciples in our own day – not merely by organizations whose status as cults is not in doubt and by groups whose claim to being "Christian" can clearly be seen as false by any mature believer, but also sadly and alarmingly within the church-visible itself.

(20) "Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. (21) I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. (22) So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. (23) I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds." Revelation 2:20-23

Thyatira, it will be recalled, was the Church era of compromise wherein the church-visible first admitted into its fellowship and accommodated within its rank the false, Satanic element that would eventually require the removal of all genuine believers from the traditional "church" of that day through the Reformation. That false element, unbelievers in the service of Satan masquerading as believers, is termed by our Lord above as "Jezebel" on account of that individual's notoriously seductive and debilitating undermining of the true worship of God in ancient Israel. Likewise in the era of Thyatira, the traditional church-visible in general and its hierarchy in particular was in the process of being thoroughly infiltrated by unbelievers in the employ of Satan. And it is not too much to say that the situation in Colossae was similar (with Gnostics and legalistic/mystics playing the part of Jezebel). Not only that, but we see a dangerously comparable situation today in many if not most churches as they compete for membership, influence, and money, having struck a very dangerous bargain in their desire for worldly success.

(17) I entreat you, brothers, to mark those who are creating conflicts and pitfalls contrary to the doctrine you have learned, and stay away from them. (18) For such men do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own stomachs, deceiving innocent hearts with their fancy sermons. Romans 16:17-18

Time would fail us in endeavoring to list and analyze all of the errors of doctrine and spiritually dangerous activities presently abroad in all of the various churches and denominations in this country today. It will have to suffice to examine in brief the so-called "emergent church movement". This should prove to be a valuable exercise inasmuch as this is a trans-church phenomenon wherein we find most of the disturbing trends currently plaguing the church-visible in general. In its teachings and approaches it also bears a closer resemblance to the heterogeneous variations and combinations of false doctrines being practiced by the groups and

individuals which were menacing the Colossian church of Paul's day.

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom.
1st Corinthians 1:22 NIV

The above verse nicely summarizes the two main categories of false teaching in the first century: 1) mystic legalism (or legalistic mysticism, depending upon whether following the Law was employed as a putative avenue into deeper truths or focusing directly on other-worldly matters was used as a vehicle to understanding the Law); and 2) the search for wisdom (or employment of secret knowledge, depending upon whether unveiling mysteries for their own sake or employing mysterious knowledge in Gnostic rites and spiritual combat was the focus). And it needs to be repeated that the overlap between these two categories was so significant that disaggregating them was a nigh on impossible (and in any case fruitless) task. That is why Paul often tackles the two categories in combination without bothering to try to distinguish them.

(16) So don't let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in the category of festival observances, be it of new moons or Sabbaths. (17) All these things are shadows of what was to come, but the reality has to do with Christ. (18) Let no one gain control over your life, desiring to [enslave you to himself] through a show of false humility and the adoration of angels, basing his approach on what he has [allegedly] seen while puffed up by his own fleshly thoughts, (19) yet not embracing the Head [Christ]. For it is from this Source that the entire body [the Church] is [truly] supplied and instructed through [all] its joints and sinews, and [thus] produces the growth that God has given. (20) If you have died with Christ to these false [pagan] principles [belonging to] this world, why are you letting yourselves be [wrongly] indoctrinated as if your life were of this world? In accordance with the commandments and teaching of [mere] men [these false teachers tell you]: (21) "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!", (22) even though [we know] that all these [are only] things [which] decay with use. (23) Such teachings have a [false] reputation for wisdom, but [only] in concocted religion, [false] humility, and [legalistic] harsh treatment of the body – they have no actual power to neutralize the [sinful] flesh (i.e., the sin nature is not to be controlled by these legalistic approaches).
Colossians 2:16-23

This toxic combination of Gnostic and mystic theosophy is unmistakably evident throughout the "emergent church" movement and particularly within groups and individuals associated with the so-called "New Apostolic Reformation" (N.A.R.). Seeking to "restore" spiritual gifts which were curtailed by God before the end of the apostolic era (such as prophecy, apostleship, tongues and the overt accomplishment of miracles) is bad enough. Posing as combatants in "spiritual warfare" to "combat evil" in the culture is patently Gnostic, especially when (as is increasingly common) such practitioners openly proclaim that they are fighting evil spirits, engaging in exorcisms and other dangerously unbiblical behavior – precisely the sort of things that scripture explicitly prohibits.

(8) In the very same way, on the strength of their dreams these ungodly people pollute their own bodies, reject authority and heap abuse on celestial beings. (9) But even the

archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, "The Lord rebuke you!" (10) Yet these people slander whatever they do not understand, and the very things they do understand by instinct – as irrational animals do – will destroy them.

Jude 1:8-10 NIV

(10) This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, they are not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings; (11) yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not heap abuse on such beings when bringing judgment on them from the Lord. (12) But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish.

2nd Peter 2:10-12 NIV

As bad as this set of trends is, applying these false teachings to political and social action (as this movement seeks to do) is beyond reckless. It is not difficult to see that seeking to exert Christian dominance over political, economic and cultural institutions through such dubious and essentially demonic methods can easily undermine the saving faith of individuals who allow themselves to be sucked into this malicious trap. It is also very easy to see how that engagement in such a movement and in such behavior will prime these individuals for the coming of antichrist and his pseudo-Christian religion. Instead of "ushering in the kingdom of God" as these groups claim to be attempting to do, we see clearly enough Satan's blueprint for ushering in the kingdom of his son, the beast.

And they worshiped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast. And they [also] worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast? And who is able to make war with him?"

Revelation 13:4

And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship [the beast], [that is, all] whose names are not [still] written in the book of life [where they were written] from the beginning of the world, [even the book] which belongs to the Lamb who was slain.

Revelation 13:8

Sadly, however, one does not need to look only to these extremist groups to find the same and/or similar disturbing trends. For wherever love of the truth has largely perished, all manner of falsity ever floods in to fill the vacuum, and that is the genesis of many such related evils which are currently being practiced in the church-visible of our day. Because of the spiritually dangerous nature of these practices, it is worth repeating the following list:

- ◆ **Contemplative prayer:** using mystic and far eastern techniques, so called "spiritual formation", to produce trance-like states purposely devoid of thought (contrast: "I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also.": 1Cor.14:15 ESV).
- ◆ **Spiritual advisors and intrusive "discipleship":** handing over one's free will to the

direction of another person of dubious spirituality by running one's decisions by them and confessing sins to them rather than accepting personal responsibility for spiritual growth (contrast: "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?": Gal.5:7 NIV).

- ◆ **Non-biblical and anti-biblical practices:** engaging in activities such as yoga, "quantum spirituality", mysticism and various mystical practices without regard for their pagan and demonic associations (contrast: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.": 1Cor.10:21 NIV).
- ◆ **Ecumenicalism:** joining hands with groups and individuals whose tenets and behavior mark them out as non-Christian and inherently hostile to the true gospel of Jesus Christ (contrast: "Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work.": 2Jn.1:11 NIV).
- ◆ **Social gospel:** attempting to "bring in the kingdom" through charitable activities which lose sight of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ alone (contrast: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.": Eph.2:8-9 NKJV).
- ◆ **Dominionism:** attempting to "bring in the kingdom" through political action by creating it on earth so that the Lord will return (contrast: "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed.": Lk.17:20 ESV).
- ◆ **Prophecy:** falsely claiming new revelations from God even though this gift has ceased (contrast: "For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.": Rev.22:18-19 NKJV).
- ◆ **Tongues:** falsely claiming the ability to speak in some other "heavenly" language which is demonstrably not a language at all (contrast: "So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.": 1Cor.14:9 NIV).
- ◆ **Healing:** falsely claiming the ability to heal by touch in order to gain a following and donations (contrast: "But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.": 2Tim.3:13 NKJV).
- ◆ **Contemporary worship:** utilizing loud and highly rhythmic music containing biblically dubious lyrics, accompanied by light displays, heavy use of drums and repetition, in order to arouse the emotions so as to produce a false and transitory spirituality (contrast: "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.": Amos 5:23 NIV).

- ◆ **Spiritual warfare:** misusing scriptures which deal with this topic to falsely engage in Gnostic-like combat with demonic forces, contacting so-called "spiritual guides", conducting false exorcisms, claiming to be able to impart gifts and powers to others through the laying on of hands (contrast: "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' ": Matt.7:22-23 NKJV).
- ◆ **Word of Power:** misusing scripture to falsely claim the ability to manipulate physical reality, heal and bring in prosperity, a.k.a., "the prosperity gospel", through "naming it" and "claiming it", etc. (contrast: "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.": 1Tim.6:8 NIV).
- ◆ **Motivational speaking:** substituting sermonizing for Bible teaching, seeking to entertain rather than to teach, using pop psychology, self-help, self-esteem, and so-called "positive thinking" techniques, or concentrating on topics of small import in scripture but of great interest to the itching ears of congregations, such as issues of relationships, careers and political causes (contrast: "I entreat you, brothers, to mark those who are creating conflicts and pitfalls contrary to the doctrine you have learned, and stay away from them. For such men do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own stomachs, deceiving innocent hearts with their fancy sermons.": Rom.16:17-18).
- ◆ **Appropriation from the Law:** wrongly adopting the practices of worship in the temple and perverting them for their own use, such as the priesthood, special vestments, altars, temple-like churches and cathedrals, baptisms and holy water, sacraments and candles and other rituals and rites, whether in the Roman Catholic fashion or usurped as a putative "revival" of the Law (contrast: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.": Rom.10:4 NKJV).
- ◆ **Appropriation from the pre-canon period:** wrongly adopting the practices of the early Church before the transition from Law to grace had been completed and while "sign gifts" were still being legitimately given by the Spirit, claiming apostleship, the ability to endue with the Spirit by the laying on of hands, the revival of all manner of spiritual gifts and practices which were never meant to continue once "the perfect" canon of scripture had been completed (contrast: "Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.": 1Cor.13:8-10 NKJV).
- ◆ **False doctrine:** paying lip-service to the Bible but through preference to tradition actually holding to teachings which are demonstrably wrong through even cursory reading of scripture, such as the pre-Tribulation "rapture", "once saved, always saved", a necessity for church membership or water-baptism, etc. (contrast: "And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.": Matt.15:9 NKJV).

- ◆ **False priorities:** paying lip-service to spiritual growth, but in reality focusing all efforts on their church building, on the growth of their congregation in terms of mere numerical size, and on bringing in ever more money to support these operations (contrast: "Until I come, devote yourself to [public] reading [of the scriptures], to encouragement [through the Word], to the teaching [of the Word]". 1Tim.4:13).

In our day, not only is it virtually impossible to find a local church where the Word of God is being taught correctly, authoritatively, and in sufficient depth to provide the congregation the means for spiritual growth, but it is also rare to find a place that has not given itself over to at least some of the practices listed above (along with other legalistic or emotional excesses not on the list). It is one of the biting ironies of our times that believers who are unwilling to associate with any group which indulges in such stultifying and spiritually harmful activities and false teaching are pilloried for "not going to church" – even when they are taking pains and making significant sacrifices in order to grow, progress and produce for Jesus Christ, just not in the traditional (and greatly flawed) way. Instead, of course, it is a wise believer who stays away from what is dangerous, even if everyone is telling him/her that they are wrong for doing so (Matt.10:16; Rom.16:19).

(12) "When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? (13) Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. (14) Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them."
Isaiah 1:12-14 NIV

"I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me."
Amos 5:21 NIV

"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands."
Malachi 1:10 NIV

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.
1st Corinthians 11:17 NIV

Similarly in Paul's day, activity of the sort outlined in the section above paraded as a means for "helping God", often through putative combat with unseen evil forces; and while said combat sometimes patterned itself after the Law in selective asceticism, it more frequently involved illicit sexual behavior – which of course required the participant to turn scripture on its head. Herein we see all three satanic lies on full display: turning away from the truth to a substitute, alternative "truth", then indulging oneself with no thought of God's authority, then finally justifying oneself by replacing God in one's heart with "another god" who needed help in fighting

this fight against Satan – wherein the person has actually become a tool of the devil. Revelation even calls the enigmatic, shadowy and constantly shifting principles upon which this movement was based "the deep things of Satan" (Rev.2:24) – because they are actually the devil's lies, not in any way hostile to him in fact. Secret knowledge has always been appealing – to the naive. Otherwise there would be no explanation for Scientology – or of Eve's fascination with the idea placed in her head by the devil speaking through the serpent of becoming "like God" (or "gods") through eating of the tree of knowledge. And it is easy for false teachers to claim such knowledge, especially if it is only grudgingly given out and at a high price. The fact of such stinginess and demand for great compensation for its dispersal and great sacrifice in order to be enlightened has historically always seemed to have piqued the interest of many victims (cf. the case study of Naaman: 2Ki.10:5-13). These are the sorts of problems we see today in the "emergent" church-visible; these are the sorts of problems with which Paul was contending in writing to the Colossians.

Rather than attempting to identify and define in detail the shadowy and frequently shifting false doctrines of these groups and individuals, however, Paul adopted an affirmative defense. Instead of expending his time, effort and limited space in this epistle on direct refutation of what is false, Paul for the most part confronts these dangerous heresies with *the truth*. For this reason alone, studying the letter to the Colossians is very worthwhile for us today, because while identifying and classifying the precise nature of the kaleidoscopic groups and shadowy, shifting false teachings believers face today and will face in the near future is potentially a monumental task, knowing *the truth* will always be useful – especially since the specific set of doctrines Paul focuses on in this book are the very ones which are most useful and necessary to apply in defending against the diabolical challenges of the sort that troubled the believers in Colossae were facing, the very same ones which are likewise becoming ever more prominent in the church-visible of our own day.

The True Mystery: For pagan Greeks, a "mystery" (*mysterion* / μυστήριον) was a cryptic rite, a covert ritual or an arcane piece of information that only the initiates of certain cults (the Eleusian mysteries, for example) were permitted to know, a secret, in other words, that was generally hidden from all but the select few. This was the essence of the "gnosis" or special knowledge that the Gnostics and Jewish mystics were purveying in Colossae and through it trying to tempt believers into their webs of deceit. Human beings naturally find secrets appealing, and especially if said esoteric information holds the promise of conveying some special advantage or power. On the one hand, the sin nature doesn't want to be "on the outs", deprived of knowing what others know, especially if such knowledge is desirable or purports to hold the key to something attractive or appealing; on the other hand, gaining the upper hand over others through such special knowledge is also a prospect that has always stoked the innate arrogance of the sin nature.

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and was attractive to the eye, and that the tree was desirable for bestowing insight, she took some of its fruit and ate it, then gave it also to her husband with her and he ate.
Genesis 3:6

Being initiated into the Gnostic mysteries or the esoteric knowledge of the Jewish mystics was,

therefore, a tempting prospect to these relatively new believers in Christ – just as the promise of accessing miraculous gifts, engagement with hidden powers, and transforming present reality through such activities is today leading many Christians astray. But in starkest contrast to all such false doctrines and satanic ploys, Christian "mystery" is *not* hidden: it has been made available to all who call upon the Lord Jesus Christ in truth, for *He* is the mystery once hidden but now revealed in glory. So while the word "mystery" in the New Testament can refer to a good many truths that have only been fully revealed since the advent, sacrifice and resurrection of Christ and since the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, who He is as the God-man and what He has done for us on the cross, is, in Colossians in particular, the essential "mystery" which Paul opposes to false doctrines of the Gnostics and Jewish mystics.

The lure of imparting secret knowledge has been one of the "tricks" of Gnosticism since the first century, the suggestion that only they possess some "hidden truth" that will prove to be the key to whatever it is the person being trapped is lusting after. This offer of some sort of powerful knowledge is a lie, of course, and while it always pulls those who buy into that temptation into what is false, it can also lead to doubting what is true. That is the double-edged demonic sword that Gnosticism/mysticism was wielding over the Colossian church, a veritable Q.E.D. for the devil's platform since to the extent that a believer succumbs to false teaching of this sort to any degree, to that extent they will be pulled *away* from Christ and *towards* the devil. This is precisely the danger that the no doubt extremely attractive false religion of antichrist will pose to believer and unbeliever alike during the Tribulation – and therefore an excellent rationale for giving the book of Colossians our closest attention.

"But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets."
Revelation 10:7 NIV

The word "mystery", as can be seen from this quotation, entails the entire plan of God which has been made manifest in glorious detail since the advent, sacrifice, resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ who *is* the plan of God, the very Word of God incarnate, the Logos Himself.

(25) Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of *the mystery* hidden for long ages past, (26) but *now revealed* and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith – (27) to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!
Amen.
Romans 16:25-27 NIV

As the passage above also makes clear, sometimes authors of scripture are given to focus on certain aspects of the plan of God, things that were veiled before Christ was revealed to the world. But whether we are speaking of the expansion of the Church to gentiles (as in the quote immediately above: Rom.11:25; Col.1:25-27; Eph.3:1-11), or specific points of truth revealed miraculously (1Cor.2:7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Eph.6:19; 1Tim.3:16), what all of these mysteries have in common is that they are all part and parcel of *the* essential mystery: the victory of Jesus

Christ. His resolution of the entire conflict with the forces of evil, His payment for sin, His salvation of all who choose to believe, He, Jesus Christ is the fundamental truth that was only fully revealed to the world when He entered into it, taking on human flesh and winning the victory of all victories at the cross. Jesus Christ is thus *the* mystery who has now been unveiled for all to see and behold, resurrected and glorified, with all these truths being illuminated by the gift of the Spirit.

(8b). . . in all wisdom and understanding (9) [God] has made known to us *the mystery* He has willed (according to His own benevolent purpose which He determined in [Christ]) (10a) for administering (lit., for the dispensing of) this [present] fulfillment of the epochs: namely the incorporation of all things in *Christ*, things in heaven, and things on earth.
Ephesians 1:8b-10a

(4) When you read these things you will be able to understand my spiritual insight into *this mystery* of *Christ*, (5) which was not made known to mankind in previous generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.
Ephesians 3:4-5

This mystery is great – and I am [really] speaking about *Christ* and about the Church (i.e., rather than the putative subject of the passage, the proper relationship between man and wife).
Ephesians 5:32

(25) It is of this [Church] that I, [Paul], have become a minister according to God's mandate given to me for dispensing [the truth] to you, in order to bring completeness to God's plan (lit., "word", Gk. *logos*), (26) that is, [to make known] *the mystery* hidden from ages and from generations [past], but now revealed to His holy ones (i.e., believers). (27) To all such God desired to make known what wealth there is in this glorious *mystery* regarding the gentiles, for it is that *Christ* – your hope of glory – is in you.
Colossians 1:25-27

(1) I want you to know what a great struggle I am engaging in on your behalf and on behalf of those in Laodicea and [on behalf of] as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, (2) [struggling] that your hearts may be encouraged, being instructed in love and [led] into the entire treasury of [spiritual] understanding, confidently believed, so as to [possess] the full-knowledge (*epignosis*) of *the mystery* of God the Father, [namely] *Christ*.
Colossians 2:1-2

And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the *mystery* of *Christ*, for which I am in chains.
Colossians 4:3 NIV

As we can easily conclude from reading the passages above, Jesus Christ is *the* mystery. He is the Logos, the plan of God Himself, the Word of God incarnate. Everything in creation and in

the brilliant plan of God is summed up in Him (Eph.1:10). All things were made by Him, through Him and for Him (Col.1:16). And it is through His sacrifice for us on Calvary's cross in paying the entire price of our redemption that we have been saved (Eph.1:7; Col.1:14). These blessed truths are well-known to every believer – or should be – but before our Lord came into the world as a human being, before the cross, before the resurrection, before the coming of the Holy Spirit, these most fundamental and essential doctrines were shared with believers only "through a mirror darkly", through the symbolic representations of the Law, so that even the great believers and prophets of the past "searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow" (1Pet.1:10-11 NIV). But now, after our Lord's great victory on the cross, the mystery has been fully revealed in perfect clarity – to all who believe and who have thus been given the gift of the Holy Spirit so as to be able to understand and appreciate it.

(25) Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about **Jesus Christ**, in keeping with the revelation of **the mystery hidden for long ages past**, (26) but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God.

Romans 16:25-26a NIV

Thus Paul's references to "mystery" in Colossians are in direct and vivid contrast to the false claims of the Gnostics and Jewish mystics to alone possess secret information which can only be gotten by joining in with them. And while it has ever been true that the tantalizing secrets of such individuals and organizations are never actually fully forthcoming – and no wonder since they are a pack of satanic lies (Rev.2:24) – as a herald of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul openly proclaims the truth in this letter, the truth of Jesus Christ given freely and at no cost to us, the entire cost having been paid on the cross by our dear Lord and Savior.⁹

And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

Revelation 22:17 NKJV

True Fullness and Completeness: The same phenomenon can be observed in Paul's free use of other legitimate biblical terms which he directly opposes in this epistle to their misappropriated use by the Gnostics and Jewish mystics:

(25) It is of this [Church] that I, [Paul], have become a minister according to God's mandate given to me for dispensing [the truth] to you, in order to bring **completeness** to God's **plan** (lit., "word", Gk. *logos*), (26) that is, [to make known] **the mystery** hidden from ages and from generations [past], but now **revealed** to His holy ones (i.e., believers). (27) To all such God desired to **make known** what wealth there is in this glorious **mystery** regarding the gentiles, for it is that **Christ** – your hope of glory – is in you. (28) It is Him

⁹ For more on "mystery", see in SR 5, "The Mystery of Christ"; in BB 4A: Christology, "Mystery"; and in BB 6B: Ecclesiology, "The Mystery Age and the Mystery Complement".

we are proclaiming as we warn every [believer] and teach every [believer] in all *wisdom* so that we may bring every [believer] to *completeness* (i.e., spiritual maturity) in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 1:25-28

Gnostic/mystic notions of salvation achieved through knowledge rather than through faith were apparently very appealing to the intellectually inclined Colossians, but to accept that one is saved through gaining esoteric knowledge rather than through trusting God in Jesus Christ is in actuality terminally destructive to true saving faith. In the passage above, Paul affirms that he is a genuine "dispenser" or steward of the truth of salvation¹⁰, having been given that mandate by God Himself with the purpose of carrying out the actual plan of God as opposed to Gnostic/mystic fabrications. The *real* plan of God is Jesus Christ. He is the Word, the Logos, the embodiment of all truth as the One who is the Truth, the Word of God incarnate (Rev.19:13). This mystery – of salvation effected through the coming of the Son of God and His sacrifice for us on the cross – has now been revealed to all believers through the Spirit, knowledge (*gnosis*) "made known" to us by God Himself, knowledge become "super-knowledge" (*epignosis*) when we believe it and make it our own through faith and the ministry of the Spirit. This is the way God the Father intends to bring completeness (*teleiotes*) to His plan and to bring those who belong to His Son to completeness (so as to become *telios*).

And [as the capstone] over all these things put on love which is the unifying [virtue] of [spiritual] maturity (lit., "completion" / *teleiotes*).

Colossians 3:14 (cf. Eph.4:2-3)

Jesus Christ is the Logos, the Word of God, the very plan of God incarnate. Only in Him and through Him can there be completion of the plan which is designed to bring order, unity, harmony and perfection back to the world in the wake of Satan's rebellion and subsequent, necessary divine judgment. That will not be accomplished through "battling aeons" or dangerous involvement with the demonic in supposed "spiritual warfare". Those false Gnostic paths are designed by Satan to lure weak believers away from the true faith. That was true in Paul's day. That is true today in regard to the similarly spiritually dangerous behavior emanating from the so-called "emergent church". We believers who are determined to follow Jesus Christ wherever He leads us embrace wholeheartedly Paul's opposing of the principle of true, godly completion/perfection to the cheap and deadly substitutes proffered by the evil one and his minions.

Epaphras, one of your own, a slave of Christ, greets you, always struggling for you in his prayers, that you may stand your ground perfect (*teleioi*) and fully complete (*pleroo*) in the entire will of God.

Colossians 4:12

The second word in italics above, a perfect form of the Greek verb *pleroo* which means "fill up", represents a second shot across the bow of Gnostic teachings, because it is the verbal counterpart

¹⁰ See Hebrews Chapter 1, section I.e, "Dispensations".

of the noun *pleroma* from the same root. In Gnosticism, this "fullness" refers to the full combination of divinities, a supreme God who is unknowable (mis-representing the Father), a lower creator god or demiurge (mis-representing the Son), and a host of other lesser divinities or aeons (mis-representing elect and fallen angels). We who know the truth understand that true fullness resides only in the One true God our Father and in Jesus Christ His Son who "fills up all things in all ways" (Eph.1:23). Paul was intent on protecting the Colossian believers from this insidious false teaching that apparently appealed to their intellectual curiosity by affirming what was actually true and thus contrasting it starkly to the lies they were being fed.

(9) For in Christ all the **fullness** of the Deity lives in bodily form, (10) and in Christ you have been brought to **fullness**. He is the head over every power and authority.
Colossians 2:9-10 NIV

True fullness, true completeness is found in God alone and comes from God alone. By making that point repeatedly throughout this epistle, Paul is indirectly attacking the Gnostic and mystic canards, by directly opposing God's truth to their lies (cf. Col.1:9; 1:19; 1:24; 1:25; 2:2; 2:9; 2:23; 4:12; 4:17). That confrontation – of truth opposing lies – is also to be seen in the passage above in Paul's confirmation that Jesus Christ is Deity even as He possesses true humanity, and that our Lord is **the** head over "every power and authority", terms that refer to angelic as well as human sovereigns, whether fallen or elect. In other words, Paul never provides us with a description of Gnosticism or Jewish mysticism. To do so would be to give far too much respect to those systems of satanic lies. But Paul does provide the positive, from which we can infer the negative, in the process of demolishing these lies through the expedient of using their own terminology to cut the ground out from under them.

True Power:

(16) Everything in the heavens and on the earth was created by Him (Jesus Christ), things invisible as well as those visible – whether thrones, authorities, rulers or powers, everything was created through Him and for Him. (17) And He Himself is before everything, and everything subsists in Him.
Colossians 1:16-17

God's power is the only true power (cf. Col.1:29; Col.1:11-13; 2:12). The devil and his lieutenants can only do what they are allowed to do and, as creatures, any power they have came originally from Him – so that they only continue to exist and are only able to exercise their derived power because of His forbearance in the execution of the one perfect plan of God.

(12) Giving thanks to the Father who has rendered you sufficient to receive your share in the inheritance of the saints in the light [of eternity], [the very One] (13) who rescued us from the power of darkness and delivered us into the Kingdom of His beloved Son.
Colossians 1:12-13

Gnosticism and mysticism sought/seek to access supernatural power through supposedly godly activities – which were/are merely communing with demonic forces. But just as He created them

in the first place, so by right and by the victory of the cross, Jesus Christ is the true Head over all things in the universe, including the misnamed forces whose power the heretical teachers in Colossae – and in the church-visible today – think to procure for themselves.

(9) For in Him (i.e., Jesus Christ), dwells all of the fullness of deity in bodily form. (10) And you have received your complete fulfillment in Him who is the Head of every ruler and [every] power.
Colossians 2:9-10

[For by means of the cross, God] has stripped [demon] rulers and authorities [of their power] and subjected them to public humiliation, having triumphed over them in [Christ].
Colossians 2:15

Seeking to interpose between believers and our Lord Jesus Christ a demiurge and aeons, Satan and his angels by another name, are attempting to turn the truth upside down, deliberately seeking to obscure our focus on the One who saved us, the One to whom we owe everything. No amount of intellectual titillation or emotional excess (supposedly of a supernatural origin) is worth degrading our most important relationship to any degree whatsoever, something the Colossian believers had apparently lost sight of – along with many believers today.

True Knowledge and Wisdom: Gnosticism and mysticism represent "knowledge" as the key to accessing divine power and that is true. However, of course, only the truth has any real power. Knowledge which is composed of lies has no power at all – except to destroy those who allow themselves to be deceived by it. And we who are following Jesus Christ also know that even the truth only benefits us if we believe it – if we allow the Spirit to convert mere *gnosis*/knowledge into *epignosis*/full-knowledge by accepting it *as* true through believing it.

"And to man He said, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.' "
Job 28:28 NKJV

We believers are blessed to have unlimited access to the truth and to all the wisdom that such truth imparts, *if* we humbly engage in God's means of accessing that truth. But those who seek exciting experiences and supernatural "deep things" which are not actually of God are not acting in genuine reverence and respect for Him, not being willing to do things His way, choosing instead their own ways.

"They have chosen their own ways, and they delight in their abominations."
Isaiah 66:3 NIV

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.
John 3:19 NIV

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

Colossians 2:8 NIV

C. The Actual Plan of God: Jesus Christ

(15) [Jesus Christ] is the exact image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (16) Everything in the heavens and on the earth was created by Him, things invisible as well as those visible – whether thrones, authorities, rulers or powers, everything was created through Him and for Him. (17) And He Himself is before everything, and everything subsists in Him. (18) And He Himself is the Head of the Body, [that is,] the Church. [Even] He who is [its] Ruler, the Firstborn from the dead, [thus resurrected] to the purpose that He Himself might become the One who occupies the first place in all things. (19) For it was [God's] good pleasure for the fulfillment [of His plan] to reside entirely in [Christ], (20) and so through Him to reconcile everything to Himself, having made peace through Him, through the blood of His cross, whether things on earth, or things in heaven.

Colossians 1:15-20

Jesus Christ is the Logos (Jn.1:1-14). Jesus Christ is the actual plan of God (Rev.22:13). All things were created for Him and by Him (Col.1:16) and all that exists only subsists in Him (Col.1:17), sustained by the word of power (Heb.1:3) of Him who is the living Word of God (Rev.19:13).

(1) Before all else, God created the heavens and the earth. (2) But the earth came to be ruined and despoiled – darkness lay upon the face of the abyss while God's Spirit brooded over the surface of its waters. (3) Then God said, "Let light be!", and there was light.

Genesis 1:1-3

God created the world in perfection, but it was His good pleasure to create creatures who would serve Him not out of necessity but from the heart (cf. Jn.4:23-24). This occasioned what was inevitable in a perfect plan with a perfectly orchestrated outcome, namely, that some would reject God's desire, given the choice to do so, and that a tremendous sacrifice would be required to redeem those who would in the end desire to come back to Him. Endowing angels with free will meant the rebellion of some, the necessity of judging the contaminated universe, of creating another order of creature likewise endowed with the ability to choose, and of paying the ineffable price of redemption for them when they inevitably fell but were, in part, willing to return to Him. Jesus Christ, as we believers all know full well, is the One who paid that price. And since the cross is the means employed by the Father to restore the original fullness, completeness and harmony to His creation, it is not too much to say that Jesus Christ *is* the plan of God, the Word/Logos/plan of God incarnate (cf. Col.1:5; 1:25; 2:23; 3:16; 3:17; 4:3; 4:6). This blessed eventuality is not an adjustment to the devil's rebellion or to mankind's fall – this was always the plan of God from the beginning. The only way to have a blessed eternity where we worship the Father and the Son in the Spirit willingly in glory forever is this way, the way it was always

intended, before God created time and space.

(23) "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. (24) God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."
John 4:23-24 NIV

And the Father did all this *for us*, to share Himself with us. And how do we know that is true? We know it of a certainty because He sent His beloved, only Son to become one with us and to die for us, for all of our sins, that we might have eternal life with Him forever.

(13) "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. (14) Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, (15) that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. (16) For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (17) For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."
John 3:13-17 NIV

In the true plan of God, the actual plan of God, restoration of light and the elimination of darkness, restoration of genuine fullness, harmony and completeness *is* the goal – and Jesus Christ is both the means to achieving that goal and the end thereof – *not* any demonic power, *not* any creature, human or angelic, falsely seeking to appropriate the authority and the glory of the Creator.

. . . everything was created through Him and for Him. (17) And He Himself is before everything, and everything subsists in Him.
Colossians 1:16b-17

(1) God, from antiquity communicated to our fathers in the prophets at many times and in many ways, (2) [but now] in these last days He has communicated to us in a Son, [the One] whom He has appointed heir of all things, [the One] through whom He created the universe (i.e., time-space). (3) He is the shining forth of [the Father's] glory, the precise image of His essence, the One who [in His deity] sustains the universe by His mighty Word. When He had accomplished the cleansing of [our] sins [in His humanity], He took His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (4) [And at His session (v.3), Jesus] became [manifestly] superior to the angels to the degree that He received as [a part of] His inheritance a Name so much more glorious than theirs.
Hebrews 1:1-4

Throughout Colossians, Paul subtly opposes principles of truth to the falsities being preached by the Gnostic and mystic teachers of the Law, not explaining or debunking their lies directly, but hammering away at the truth so that all will see the distinction between that clear and blessed truth and the deceptive false teaching by which the Colossian believers were being thrown into such spiritual disarray. For in truth "chaff and wheat" have nothing whatsoever to do with one

another (Jer.23:28), even if practiced liars are good at trying to conflate the two in order to tempt the spiritually immature into following the lead of their true commander, the devil. In the end, they will bear the consequences of their actions. That was true of the Gnostics and legalistic-mystics of Paul's day. That is true of all who are perverting the truth and leading believers astray in the church-visible today with all their "emergent", "new age", and "spiritual warfare" falderal.

(20) "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. (21) Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight."

Isaiah 5:20-21 NIV