

**A Study Commentary
on
Colossians**

William B. Barclay



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Introductory matters

Colossians: The supremacy of Christ in a syncretistic age

How should Christians respond when a variety of unbiblical philosophies and extra-biblical religious practices begin to work their way into the life of the church? This is what the apostle Paul was facing when he wrote his letter to the Colossians. In significant ways, it is also what the evangelical church is facing today. In this way, Colossians is an important book for our times.

The word ‘syncretism’ means the combining of different philosophical or religious beliefs or practices. Syncretism was a prevailing feature of the Greco-Roman world, sometimes called the ‘Hellenistic age’, when Paul lived in the first century.¹ And it is a growing feature of our world in the twenty-first century. In fact, there are many similarities between the first and twenty-first

centuries, which are largely due to similar historical and cultural developments that helped shape those centuries.

In the classical Greek world (prior to the fourth century BC), life was largely tied to one's small community (called, in Greek, a *polis*), which was largely what we might call an independent city-state. The polis was a self-contained community and largely self-supporting. Individuals lived and worked within their polis, and the polis met their financial and social needs. Trade took place with other communities, but for the most part individuals did not travel much, and the individual communities were not significantly affected by other cultures.

This life of being tied to one's own community began to change with the rise of Alexander the Great and his programme to spread Greek language and culture (Hellenism). Alexander sought to unify the world around what he saw as the superior philosophy and culture of the Greeks. Closer to the first centuries BC and AD, the life of the polis began to break down. Individuals began to travel more and the rise of larger, more cosmopolitan cities commenced. In these cities, different cultures and religions began to come in contact with each other and to influence each other, with the result that many in the Hellenistic world embraced a variety of religious beliefs and practices.

This phenomenon led F. C. Grant, in his book *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism*, to assert that 'syncretism' was 'the main characteristic feature of Hellenistic religion'.² This, of course, affected the religious milieu of the cities that Paul ministered to and started churches in. Greco-Roman cities in the first century typically had temples or shrines to numerous gods and goddesses, and contained a wide variety of religions and religious practices. Clinton Arnold, an expert on Colossae and Colossians, has estimated the worship of at least twenty deities in Colossae,

as well as the strong presence of ‘magical practices’ and so-called mystery religions.³ As is the case today, the trends of the larger culture were a powerful lure for Christians. (This, by the way, is precisely why God told the Israelites when they entered the promised land to wipe out the Canaanites, so they would not be enticed and ensnared in their idolatry.)

It is easy to see how the trends leading to the first century parallel the trends over the last 150 years leading to the twenty-first century. With the invention of automobiles and airplanes, travel has increased rapidly. As our cities have grown in the West, so we have seen the influx of people from other countries and other religions. Eastern religions have grown and flourished in western cities. And the growth in Islam in major western cities has been striking. Our cities are more cosmopolitan than they have ever been, which means that cultures and religions are colliding, with the inevitable effect of bringing together a variety of beliefs and practices.

The church has not been immune to this. Today we find much worldly philosophy that has worked its way into the church. This includes business models for running the church, therapeutic teaching and preaching based on humanistic psychology, and unbiblical views of human origins. All of these have significant implications for our understanding of the nature of humanity and the nature of our plight and solution. We also see evangelical Christians advocating and embracing a variety of forms of spirituality from outside of the evangelical tradition, including eastern spirituality with practices like transcendental meditation (not to be confused with biblical meditation on God and his Word). Evangelicals also have turned to Catholic spirituality, including Catholic mystics, and even Jewish practices. It is not unusual today for churches to hold a ‘Christianized’ Passover Seder every year.

Clear evidence of the evangelical church’s propensity to embrace

alternate views and alternative spirituality was the popularity several years ago in evangelical circles of William Young's book, *The Shack*.⁴ This novel tells the story of a man whose daughter had been murdered and who is called out into the woods to meet God in a little run-down shack. There he encounters 'the Trinity', with God the Father being portrayed as a big, black woman named Papa, God the Son as a Jewish man with a big nose and God the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman named Sarayu. Young's God is not the God of the Bible who causes those who encounter him to fall on their faces in fear, recognizing their sinfulness and unworthiness. Instead, Young's God is warm and cuddly, laughs a lot, loves everyone equally and doesn't punish people for their sin. Young's God teaches that evil and darkness do not exist. Rather, they are simply the absence of goodness and light. Young's God is not sovereign over evil, and human beings don't need to be reconciled to God because they are already reconciled to him (they just need to accept it). In addition, Young's book puts forward the old heresy that the Father suffers with the Son on the cross. The Son does not endure God's wrath for human sin.

The Bible teaches that God created man in his own image. *The Shack* creates a God in our image, or at least according to how we like to think about God. Yet evangelicals seem to have embraced this book. One friend of mine—not a pastor nor a scholar, but a professing evangelical Christian—recommended the book to me, saying that it was eye-opening and that it had 'helped' him. I have even known of churches in which classes or groups were reading the book together, or in which sermon series based on *The Shack* were preached.

Why do Christians embrace alternate philosophies and spiritualities like these? It's hard to list all of the reasons why this is so. But what we can say is that this kind of 'syncretism', the mixing

of various unbiblical ways of thinking with Scripture itself, is not new. Paul faced it in his day and wrote Colossians to correct it. In this way, Colossians is very relevant to the situation that evangelical Christians face in their churches today.

The nature of the false teaching in Colossae

Paul wrote Colossians primarily to address the false teaching that had worked its way into the Colossian church. The nature of this false teaching has been the subject of much debate throughout the centuries. Paul does not give us a systematic, full-blown description of the false teaching. But he does refer to specific elements of it. To begin with, we see clearly Jewish aspects to it: ‘Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ’ (Col. 2:16–17, ESV). The language of festivals, new moon celebrations and Sabbaths was a common way of referring to holy days set apart for God in the Old Testament (2 Chron. 2:4; 8:13; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Ezek. 45:17; Hos. 2:11). In addition, Paul’s description of these things as a ‘shadow [Greek, *skia*] of the things to come’ is reminiscent of Hebrews 10:1, where the writer says that ‘the law has but a shadow [*skia*] of the good things to come’ (ESV). The language of the law, or Old Testament holy days, as being a ‘shadow’ tells us that these are God-given ordinances that point forward to Christ. This can only apply to Old Testament revelation.

At the same time, while there are Jewish elements to the false teaching, Paul also makes clear that the false teaching is not calling the Colossian believers simply to embrace Judaism. For instance, there is an ascetic element that is based on human philosophy, not divine revelation. Paul writes, ‘Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism’ (Col. 2:18), which he goes on to spell out further:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col 2:20–23, ESV).

Furthermore, Paul’s reference to the ‘worship of angels’ and ‘going on in detail about visions’ (2:18) are clearly beyond the realm of biblical Jewish practice.

Seemingly, then, the false teachers were trying to persuade the Colossian Christians to embrace some syncretistic blend of Christianity, Judaism and human philosophy. The reasons why such a syncretistic blend of religious beliefs would have been attractive are difficult to determine with certainty. But the false teachers appear to have argued that embracing their teaching provided several advantages that the gospel and the Christian teaching originally brought to them did not. We have to read ‘between the lines’ (scholars call this ‘mirror-reading’) and look at the emphases of Colossians to determine what these advantages might have been. But they appear to include the following:

1. *Protection from, or greater confidence in the face of, evil spiritual powers.* Paul emphasizes in Colossians that Christ has delivered his people ‘from the domain of darkness’ (1:13), that he created all spiritual rulers and has authority over them (1:16), and that he triumphed over them on the cross (2:15).
2. *The offer of deeper spiritual knowledge.* The themes of knowledge, wisdom and understanding are prominent in this letter. Paul’s opening prayer for the Colossians is that they might be ‘filled with the knowledge’ of God’s will ‘in all spiritual wisdom and

understanding' and that they may increase 'in the knowledge of God' (1:9–10). He returns to this theme in chapter 2, telling them that he has had a great struggle for them, that they might attain to 'all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ' (2:1–2). He then asserts that in Christ 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:3). The false teaching, by contrast, has only 'an appearance of wisdom' (2:23).

3. *The offer of greater spiritual fullness.* The false teaching in Colossae, as is typical of all false teaching, affirmed some of the truths of the gospel, but offered something more. Paul in contrast proclaims that all the fullness of God dwells in Christ (1:19; 2:9) and, more than that, those who are united with Christ by faith 'have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority' (2:10).

Biblical scholars have presented several theories about the precise nature of the teaching at Colossae. The most prominent recent theories include the following:

1. First, some say that *there was no false teaching at all*, and that Paul was simply warning the Colossians in general to guard against the variety of divergent teachings that were prevalent in the Greco-Roman world.
2. The second theory is that *the false teaching was a form of Gnosticism*. The word Gnosticism comes from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. The Gnostics claimed to have superior knowledge, especially with regard to the nature of the universe. This would fit, then, with the emphasis on knowledge in Colossians discussed above.

Gnostics denied the goodness of creation. They held that the material world was created by an inferior god and was evil; that