

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## Colossians: Internal or External?

*PAUL, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth: As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit. (Colossians 1:1–8)*

From its inception in the first century Biblical Christianity has faced its most threatening dangers from within, not from without. External persecution historically strengthened the faithful and steeled their godly commitments to their God and to their faith. However, when a man who has gained entrance into the faith-community of the Lord's church begins to advocate error, many will look more at the man than at the teachings of Scripture and will allow their personal affiliation with the man to blind their objective knowledge of Scripture. Thus, precisely as Scripture describes the problem, insidious error spreads like leaven (yeast) in bread dough. Yeast sitting on the counter has no impact on the dough. Only as you pour it into the ingredients does it begin to spread and alter the essential character of the dough.

The obvious problem with the above attitude raises a question and exemplifies divided loyalty. Which is more important in God's view of things and in terms of what is safe and instructive to hungry sheep, loyalty to God and to His Word, or loyalty to a man who is increasingly departing from that Word and its teachings? Do we even need to ponder this question for the correct answer? (Isaiah 8:20)

Occasionally men who teach error will research Christian history and point out respected men from the past who believed what they are teaching—or who, by isolated quotes, appear to have believed similarly. Why would a man appeal to history and not to Scripture to confirm his belief? While I affirm that Biblical Christian doctrine is indeed historical, I do not look to history to inform my faith; I look to Scripture. Either Scripture thoroughly (completely, not needing additional reinforcement) informs and frames our faith, or it doesn't.

Many years ago I enjoyed a rather close friendship with a man who occasionally ventured

into various unusual ideas, but who seemed to hold to the essential doctrines of the Bible. Over time I sensed that he was venturing farther and farther away from the Biblical core of the gospel. Eventually he forsook historical, Biblical Christianity and today boasts that he is far more a "historical" Christian than he ever was because he now embraces ancient Gnosticism. Marcion is his present champion!

Marcion taught that there are two gods. The anthropomorphic god of the OT is the creator (demiurge) of the world and humanity, with all their faults (→ Creation). As the lawgiver, he is the Just One. The true and essentially good god, the Other, has revealed himself for the first time in → Jesus Christ. By the death of Christ he redeems believers from the power of the demiurge. The OT knows nothing of the good god and should not be read Christologically (→ Allegory). In keeping with the → dualism of the creator and the good god is a negative view of matter and the flesh, also a → Docetic → Christology and a demand for strict → asceticism. Only → souls receive → salvation.

→ Paul was the only → apostle to understand and uphold the → truth. Since Marcion did not accept the OT and regarded church tradition as falsified in a Jewish sense, a new norm of faith had to be found. He found it in Paul's epistles (without the Pastorals) and the → gospel that Paul transmitted directly from Christ, which is in Luke. Even these texts, however, had to be purged of falsifications. With his collection of authoritative Christian writings, Marcion set up the first NT → canon (§2.2). He expounded his teachings in *Antitheses*, a work now lost.

### 3. Relation to Gnosticism

Marcion's doctrine of two gods and abhorrence of the world linked him to → Gnosis, but his rejection of oral → tradition was a point of difference. His criticism of the OT god and depiction of the good god were under philosophical influence. Marcion, then, can hardly rank as a scriptural theologian.

Marcion's most important pupil, Apelles, turned back to monotheism and increased the merging of Marcionite doctrine with Gnosticism and philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

My former friend strongly claims that his present belief is right because of its ancient historical connection, albeit to Marcion. A man may claim a historical person of better reputation than Marcion, but the turning from Scripture to historical figures or respected personalities reveals a similar flaw to the example cited above. Why does anyone who believes the teachings of Scripture need to appeal to any source other than Scripture for what he believes and teaches? Often when investigating some of these teachings I have discovered that these brief quotes from a respected ancestor in the faith did not fully represent that man or his final belief. The advocate of error misrepresented his ancestor in the faith as fully as he misrepresented the teachings of Scripture. I have learned through significant personal pain that a man who will misrepresent ancestors in the faith has no qualms about misrepresenting Scripture as well.

Gnosticism is often regarded as the first major doctrinal crisis of Biblical, historical Christianity.<sup>2</sup> We see it in an early stage in Paul's letter to the Colossians. In both his gospel and his epistles John confronts Gnostic error more directly. Apparently what began as a pretense of other-worldly devotion in Colosse developed into a truly heretical departure of major proportions in John's time and later. Irenaeus' (late second, early third centuries) primary purpose in his historical work, *Against Heresies*, was to oppose the growing threat of Gnosticism to historical, Biblical Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, vol. 3, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 398 (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999-2003).

<sup>2</sup> I consider the attempts recorded in the New Testament to create a hybrid between Old Testament Judaism, actually in its corrupted first century form, and the teachings of Jesus to be the first major error. However, once we move beyond the Judaistic error Gnosticism in its many forms is quite likely to be the first major threat to the faith.

What is Gnosticism? In the context of this writing I will offer a few brief observations regarding its major themes and tenets.

Gnostics claimed to be [Christians](#), but Christians with a difference. They said that Jesus had two doctrines: one a doctrine fit for the common man, and preached to everyone, and the other an advanced teaching, kept secret from the multitudes, fit only for the chosen few, the spiritually elite. They, the Gnostics, were the spiritually elite, and although the doctrines taught in the churches were not exactly wrong, and were in fact as close to the truth as the common man could hope to come, it was to the Gnostics that one must turn for the real truth.<sup>3</sup>

Gnosticism at its core claims a secret, higher knowledge that one obtains from a group of self-assessed elite mystics who claim superior and secret knowledge of God. Within the Christian community today we observe a number of folks who make truth claims based either on a strained or nonsensical interpretation of Scripture or on a claim that "God revealed to me...." No one can verify either claim, and neither claim stands firmly on the ground of Scripture. If Satan presents himself as a preacher of righteousness, how do we know whether God or Satan revealed this information to the claimant, particularly if his claimed secret knowledge strains or contradicts Scripture? Occasionally men will claim various ideas that cannot be clearly affirmed by Scripture and then appeal to Deuteronomy 29:29, "*The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.*" They claim that their bizarre notion is merely part of God's "secret will," as if this passage justified their claim. The passage does not indicate that God has a secret will that in any way contradicts His revealed will as set forth in Scripture. It simply states that there are things about God that we either cannot know or do not know, but it in no way implies that any of these secret things contradict what we find revealed about God in Scripture. I will make the case that such a claim in favor of ideas not clearly and consistently set forth in Scripture and based on this allegation of God's "secret will" is in fact a form of Gnosticism, not in any way a reflection of superior Bible knowledge. If this segment of God's will is "secret," how did this man come to know its content? And if he doesn't know it—if it in fact remains God's secret—he cannot make

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<sup>3</sup> Copied from the following website: <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/186-gnosticism>.

such elaborate claims about his errant doctrine being part of God's "secret will." In fact, if God's will remains secret with God, he can make no claims whatever about it. A claim based on ignorance is no valid claim at all. Such a man in fact is presenting himself as a mystical Gnostic elitist who claims to hold the secret of deeper and unrevealed truth. You must go to him for this truth or remain in possession of only a lower, "pedestrian" form of partial truth.

In fact any idea or belief that rejects Scripture as unknowable apart from some mystical elitism, be it a claim of God's secret will or be it a truth claim merely based on one's individual, private belief, flies under the banner of Gnosticism. On what should we rely for our beliefs, the clear teaching of Scripture or on an individual's supposed superior belief system that imposes its own ideas onto Scripture rather than drawing its beliefs from Scripture?

Yes, that first and ancient heresy is alive and well within modern Christianity, so our study of Paul's letter to the Colossians is up to date and clearly on target with our need. Since Paul confronts an early, subtle form of Gnosticism in Colossians, this study frames an ideal setting for us to examine both those early Gnostic beliefs as well as contemporary pseudo-Christian, pseudo-elite Gnostic ideas in our own culture.

God willing, over the next few weeks we shall examine Paul's letter to the Colossians with two primary objectives in mind.

1. First, as with all Bible studies, we should seek to learn Biblical truth. What did the Holy Spirit direct Paul to write to the Colossian church? Why? How does it relate to us in our time? Essentially every New Testament book/letter had a specific objective or purpose. The recipients, typically either a New Testament church or an individual Christian, faced a problem and needed the inspired author's counsel to know how to deal with it. We still need their inspired counsel.
2. Secondly, as we see early Gnostic beliefs taking root through an artificial appearance of Biblical Christianity—I would call it a distinct and heretical pseudo-appearance, not in any way legitimate Biblical Christianity—we can learn firsthand how error starts with small deviations that grow over time. As our culture moves rapidly away from historical, Biblical ethics, it increasingly takes on many of the same attitudes and strategies that framed early Gnostic error. The more we know about ancient

Gnosticism the better equipped we shall be against its modern grandchild.

At the heart of any valid study of New Testament Christianity lies a central question of epistemology, one's theory of knowledge or one's source of knowledge and authority for what he/she believes to be true. At its heart ancient—and modern—Gnosticism rejects the Bible as God's exclusive written communication of truth to His people, favoring instead one's personal belief system, or one's exposure to the ancient "knowers" who claimed to have received a verbal tradition of superior knowledge from first generation Christians. According to ancient or modern Gnostics, only as you learn this ancient secret tradition from the priests of this ancient error do you become informed and knowing. Thus something you cannot verify outside the secret sources of this mystical religion becomes your epistemological fountain.

This background will serve to frame the title I give to this chapter, "Colossians: Internal or External?" While societal errors have a distinct way of making their way into Biblical churches, they only become a threat to the faith when they establish their beachheads within these churches. I believe Paul sets the stage and reveals where he plans to go with this letter in the very beginning. Our next study will begin to investigate Paul's view of epistemology, quite a contrast with either Judaism's hybrid or with the infant but growing Gnostic influence that Paul confronts in this letter. He will affirm the validity of a truly historical faith, one that was "...once for all time delivered to the saints," and one that we do well to preserve based on the teachings of Scripture without seeking to supplement or augment Scripture with other sources. Scripture instructs us to believe what we believe because of what Jesus and that first generation of men established as God's truth, thus leaving us a written record that God has preserved for our reading, the New Testament, the believer's only legitimate epistemological foundation.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
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Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor