



## Christian Origins #69 - Colossians

by Ronald L. Dart

How does a strange, new religious idea get started? Does someone wake up in the morning and say to himself, “I think I’ll start a new *heresy* today.”? Do little boys say, “Well, when I grow up, I want to be a *heretic*, Daddy.” I think it’s a little more subtle than that. But I’ll tell you this: It sure is persistent. You can give a man an *absolutely perfect* religion—a true faith—and he just can’t stand it. He’s got to find some way to improve it. He knows that there must be a button he can press that will make it better; there must be a secret compartment, a hidden area, someplace he can go into and find out things about this religion that *no one else knows*. And, you see, that becomes very important because then he can tell other people about this thing that no one else knows; and they will look up to him as a great prophet, a great guru, a great religious leader; and he can get a following for himself.

I think we are safe in assuming that Jesus gave his disciples a perfect faith. But before 20 years had passed, *all sorts* of improvements had been attempted on the Christian faith. I can’t get inside the mind of a heretic, but I have a sneaking suspicion that *ego* is involved someplace. “If I can just build a better religion, the world will beat a path to my door.”

I have no doubt the apostle Paul, by the time he got imprisoned in Rome, was getting a little tired of the parade of heresies had gone by him. And by the time he wrote his letter to the Colossians, candidly, he sounds a little testy to me. We don’t know much about the heresy in Colossae beyond what we can gather from the letter itself because, well, there’s no mention of Colossae in the Book of Acts, there’s no awareness of how the church got started, who its leaders were. The other way we can learn, really, about it is by reading the letter itself and by reading between the lines. It does appear the Paul had never been there.

Some *really screwy* ideas had turned up in Colossae. And one man named Epaphras had arrived in Rome, and had informed Paul about what was going on over there, and the result is a letter from Paul to the saints at Colossae. And you have a copy of it right there in your Bible, called the Book of Colossians. And since ideas beget ideas, *still more strange* ideas have been begotten by this letter itself. You know, you just can’t win, it seems, in this world. You have heresy that arises in a church, you write a letter to try to set things straight, and then the letter itself becomes the object of development by other people to create yet new heresies that people can chase after. Well, Paul did his best, and we’re left 2,000 years later reading someone else’s mail and trying to understand *what on earth* was going on. The letter begins with Paul’s standard boilerplate:

### Colossians 1

KJ2000

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

<sup>2</sup> To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colosse: [...]

It makes you wonder, when you read something like this, if there were also *unfaithful* brethren at Colossae, and that Paul is putting a little disclaimer in here. It’s to the “faithful” brethren in Christ who are at Colossae.

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>2</sup> [...] Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup> We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you,

<sup>4</sup> Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which you have to all the saints,

<sup>5</sup> For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel;

<sup>6</sup> Which is come to you, as it is in all the world; and brings forth fruit, as it does also in you, since the day you heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth: [*Since you really came to understand the enormous grace of God.*]

<sup>7</sup> As you also learned of Epaphras our dear fellow servant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ;

<sup>8</sup> Who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.

Now, what follows in the Book of Colossians has to be one of the *longest* sentences in all of Paul's letters. It goes on for 10 verses. And it's this sort of thing that makes the Bible hard to read. You're probably better off getting a modern translation where the translators have taken a little bit of liberty to edit Paul's work and formed it up into sentences, so that you can grasp what it is he is saying. He says:

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>9</sup> For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that you might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;

I don't know exactly what Paul means when he says "since the day that we heard it". It almost implies "since we heard about what was going on there, and we know that some of you are faithful brethren". And it's almost as though he's written this letter to *part* of the church, and not to all of it. "And since we've heard about this and we know that you people are finding the good fight, we don't stop praying for you and we really desire that you be filled with a knowledge of will and wisdom and spiritual understanding and":

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>10</sup> That you might walk worthy of the Lord to all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God;

<sup>11</sup> Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, to all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness;

<sup>12</sup> Giving thanks to the Father, which has made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light:

Now, for some reason Paul decides to use a little different analogy here, and to contrast darkness and light. We don't know (again, we're reading someone else's mail) and we don't know what the implications of this are as the Colossians read the letter. He said he [the Father] has:

**Colossians 1**

KJ2000

<sup>12</sup> [...] made us fit to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light:

<sup>13</sup> Who has delivered us from the power of darkness, and has translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son:

The Son of God, then—Christ—has a kingdom. Now, what follows on this may be a little bit surprising, so listen carefully. He says:

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>14</sup> In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:

So far, so good.

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>15</sup> Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:

Now, what does he mean by that? And the “in whom we have redemption”; who’s that? Well, it doesn’t take a lot of imagination. If you’ve read the Bible at all, you’ll know that he’s talking about Jesus—in we whom we have redemption through his blood. He has just talked about how God has “translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son”, Jesus. Jesus has a kingdom. And we have redemption through the blood of Jesus—the forgiveness of sin. And Jesus is the *image* of the invisible God, and he is the firstborn of *every creature*.

What does that mean? Well, superficially at least, you would think it means that he existed before any creature on the face of the earth existed. And that seems to be true. Jesus told his disciples:

**John 14**

ESV

<sup>9</sup> [...] Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. [...]

He was the *very image* of the invisible God. Jesus had *also* told them, “No man has seen the father at any time” [John 1:18, 6:46]. But if you’ve seen Jesus, you’ve seen the Father, because he is the image of the invisible God. But there’s more. He is “the firstborn of every creature”. What does that mean? Read on.

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>16</sup> For by him [*that is, by Jesus*] were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

Wow. The world—everything we see around us—was created *by Christ for Christ*.

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>17</sup> And he [*Christ*] is before all things, and by him all things consist.

<sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

Now, until you’ve got to that last verse, you might have assumed he was talking about the Father as the creator of all things. But no, this section is bracketed fore and aft by the identity of *Jesus Christ* as the creator of all things. Paul, in this short passage, establishes to the Colossians the pre-existence of Jesus; that he is the Creator in the Old Testament—a fact that is probably surprising to a lot of people.

Because a simple read-through of the Bible is likely to leave a person with the impression that the Father is the God of the Old Testament and Jesus is, kind of, the God of the New Testament. And in the Old Testament, the Father was the only God anybody ever knew. But a more *careful* read suggests that the only God they knew in the Old Testament was the Word of God—the one who became flesh as Jesus, the Christ.

And what does it mean when he says that Jesus is the “firstborn of every creature”? He is the firstborn *from the dead*. Spiritual rebirth in the Bible is a reference to the resurrection. Now, I know that people speak of the experience of conversion as being “born again”, and I understand the metaphor. However, I want to explain to you what Jesus meant when *he* used the expression “born again”.

So Paul speaks of Jesus as the first *born* from the dead—which means, basically (there’s no other way to understand it, really) that he’s talking about the resurrection; that Jesus was the very *first one* to be born from the dead—that is, resurrected from the dead. And so, consequently, the idea of being born again or a rebirth or a spiritual rebirth is a direct reference to the resurrection.

Now, in a lot of Christian thought, though, they attach the idea of being born again to the experience that comes about as a result of repentance of sin, the forgiveness of God, the waters of baptism, coming up out clean of all your past sins, and starting a whole new life. And they say it’s like being born again. And, as a metaphor, it works fine—especially when you consider that baptism *symbolically* is a death, burial, and resurrection, so that it *symbolizes* a spiritual rebirth. However, listen to what happened when Nicodemus—a leader of the Jews—came to Jesus and asked him about this. The account is probably familiar to you; it’s in John, chapter three:

### John 3

AKJV

<sup>2</sup> The same [*Nicodemus*] came to Jesus by night, and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that you do, except God be with him.

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, Truly, truly, I say to you, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus [*taken aback by that*] said to him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?

Showing that Nicodemus *clearly* understood that what Jesus was talking about was the process of *birth*.

### John 3

KJ2000

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

A *spiritual* rebirth. Now, it’s not hard to understand why people would think of conversion as a spiritual rebirth. But the question is: Is that what *Jesus* is talking about? For he says:

### John 3

AKJV

<sup>5</sup> [...] Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

<sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

<sup>7</sup> Marvel not that I said to you, You must be born again.

Now, if that which is born of the Spirit *is* spirit...well, I don't know that you and I could claim to be that, because we're still very much flesh and blood. But in the resurrection from the dead, those people who come up in the resurrection *will be* spirit. Jesus went on to say:

**John 3**

AKJV

<sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wants, and you hear the sound thereof, but can not tell from where it comes, and where it goes: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

And he's making it very clear: He's talking about *spirit beings*, not fleshly beings with a different attitude. The only way you get changed from flesh to spirit is in the resurrection from the dead. So Jesus, being the first *resurrected* is the first *born* from the dead. Now, continuing with Paul to the Colossians—verse 19 of the first chapter:

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>19</sup> For it pleased the Father that in him [*Jesus*] should all fullness dwell;  
<sup>20</sup> And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things to himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

This is a familiar theme, really, from the Book of Ephesians where he talks about his purpose is to bring all things together in one in Christ [**Ephesians 1:10**]. Paul continues to the Colossian saints. He says:

**Colossians 1**

KJ2000

<sup>21</sup> And you, that were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now has he reconciled  
<sup>22</sup> In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in his sight:  
<sup>23</sup> If [...]

Oh, whoops! We've got a little "if" here. Yeah. He said:

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>23</sup> If you continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which you have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister;

So Paul seems to be saying here that you can (and you certainly are going to) be in that resurrection, you certainly *are* going to be kept holy and unblameable before God, *if* you continue in the faith—which suggests that maybe you might not. Paul continues, in verse 24, to say:

**Colossians 1**

AKJV

<sup>24</sup> Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:  
<sup>25</sup> Whereof I am made a minister [*a servant*], according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God;

What's that?

**Colossians 1**

*AKJV*

<sup>26</sup> Even the mystery which has been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:

He's talking about something people didn't used to know, but now they do.

**Colossians 1**

*AKJV*

<sup>27</sup> To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:

Again, the theme is the resurrection. The theme is of being born again, of being born of the spirit, of coming to life again and having a new life—this time in the glory of God. Paul continues:

**Colossians 1**

*AKJV*

<sup>28</sup> Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:

<sup>29</sup> Whereunto I also labor, striving according to his working, which works in me mightily.

He's transitioning in chapter two.

**Colossians 2**

*KJ2000*

<sup>1</sup> For I desire that you know what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh;

"I'm troubled because I've never seen, I've never visited with you, I've never been able to talk to you in person. But I'm concerned":

**Colossians 2**

*AKJV*

<sup>2</sup> That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ;

<sup>3</sup> In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words.

And here we get the first serious hint of the problem. He is really concerned that people are coming along and beguiling them with enticing words. And the problem is that it has to do with the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge, which *only* (he says) come from Christ. Someone in Colossae had awakened one morning and decided, "I think I'll be a heretic today." And the heresy had to do with the sources of wisdom and knowledge.

Some people say this is the first hints of Gnosticism beginning to show its head. For the saints, Christ is the source, and the *only* source, of wisdom and knowledge. The Church must be built on Christ *alone*. This source of wisdom and knowledge was the same one who created the earth and revealed himself to

man in the Old Testament. But someone had come along with a *better idea*. What might that have been? Well, that's what we're going to try to grasp as we make our way through this letter. And Paul says:

**Colossians 2**

AKJV

<sup>5</sup> For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, rejoicing and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.

<sup>6</sup> As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk you in him:

<sup>7</sup> Rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.

<sup>8</sup> [*But look out!*] Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

Now, let me put this question to you: Is there any way that Paul would have described the Ten Commandments as “philosophy and vain deceit”? Well, *no*. They're not deceit; they're the word of God written with his own finger. Is there any way to imagine that the Law of God would be called “the tradition of men”? How could it be? Could the Ten Commandments be called “the rudiments of the world”? Hardly. So when Paul says this:

**Colossians 8**

AKJV

<sup>8</sup> Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

He has to be talking about something else besides the Ten Commandments, right? What *was* he talking about. Paul continues:

**Colossians 2**

AKJV

<sup>8</sup> Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

<sup>9</sup> For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

<sup>10</sup> And you are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:

<sup>11</sup> In whom also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ:

Now, at this point, some theologians take the leap to decide that this must be a reference to Judaizers. “The reason he's talking about circumcision of the heart is because someone was advocating circumcision of the flesh. And who else would be doing that but Judaizers?” And they confuse the issue still further by concluding that the religion of the Old Testament and Judaism are the same. They are not. Believe it or not, there are some people who say that Judaism is the religion of Adam, of Noah, of Abraham, of Moses—and, of course, when you come down to the New Testament, Judaism is the worship of God prior to the establishment of the Christian faith.

However, that's not really what Judaism is. Judaism *per se* is the response of the people of *Judah* (that is, the Jewish people) to the revelation of God in the Old Testament. It is their faith. And certainly we should respect Judaism as the response of the Jewish people toward God, but Judaism is not the religion of Abraham and Moses. Judaism is a much *later* development, and it has a *lot* of stuff in it that is not in the Old Testament. And a lot of the things that are included in some *aspects* of Judaism...well, some of

them they brought with them from Babylon, and they were somewhat pagan in their origins. And there are some strange esoteric, hidden-knowledge things among Jews, as well. Judaism is not, and never has been, a monolithic faith. Just as there are many forms of Judaism today, there were many forms of Judaism when Paul wrote this letter. And so, while it *seems* that there were some aspects of Judaism that may have been nibbling around the edges in Colossae, it's not the Judaism that you and I know. And it *certainly* is not the Judaism of Moses. Paul says "We are":

### Colossians 2

AKJV

<sup>12</sup> Buried with him in baptism, wherein also you are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who has raised him from the dead.

<sup>13</sup> And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, has he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

<sup>14</sup> Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;

And right here is another place where theologians take a leap of logic. They conclude that the Ten Commandments—that is, the Law of God—was what was nailed to the cross. And you'll hear people talk about that. They'll talk about, "Well, I don't have to do that anymore because that was *nailed to the cross*." But you should immediately know that something is wrong somewhere when someone tells you that a commandment like "Thou shalt not steal" was nailed to the cross and abolished. Because if that were the case, you wouldn't have any complaint coming if your neighbor comes over and steals your lawnmower. First of all, notice the structure of the sentence that we just read:

### Colossians 2

AKJV

<sup>13</sup> And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, has he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

<sup>14</sup> Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;

The way this is laid out, "forgiving us all trespasses" and "blotting out the handwriting of ordinances against us" are appositives—that is, they are two phrases that *say the same thing*. The "blotting out of the handwriting of ordinances against us" *is the same thing* as saying he has forgiven us all of our sins. And the implication of that is that the handwriting of ordinances is not the Law, but is the record of our sins. In fact, I think there's some commentaries that suggest this expression in the Greek—the handwriting of ordinances [*cheirographon tois dogmasin*]*—is a similar expression to what was used generally as a death warrant. And if that's the case, then this is not telling us that the Law was nailed to the cross; it is saying that our death warrant was nailed to the cross. And in fact, if you read the Bible very carefully, you won't find that there's any law up there in the accounts in the Gospel. What was nailed to the cross was Jesus, and a sign that said who he was, and that's all—that our sins were placed on him, and in the body of Christ our sins were nailed to the cross. And they're gone. We don't have to deal with them anymore.*

There's a fascinating law in the Old Testament that will (if you'll pardon the expression) nail this down. But that will have to wait until next time.

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