

The Purpose of Colossians:

ZChurch Online Bible School

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Introduction

Welcome to ZCHURCH Online Bible School. In this session, we will study the purpose of Paul's letter to the Colossians. This lesson addresses the Colossian heresy and Paul's defense of Christ's supremacy. We aim to recognize how false teachings diminish Christ and how Paul exalts Him as Head of the Church and fullness of God.

Section 1: Ephesians and Colossians – Distinct but Complementary

Some dismiss Colossians as a duplicate of Ephesians, but that is a misconception. Ephesians emphasizes the Body of Christ—our identity. Colossians emphasizes Christ as the Head of that Body. A body without a head is lifeless, which is why both letters are distinct and equally essential.

- Ephesians emphasizes the Body of Christ.
- Colossians emphasizes Christ as the Head of the Body.
 - The difference lies in **where the focus is placed**:
 - **Ephesians** – *Focus on the Body of Christ (the Church)*
 - Emphasizes the Church as the body being shaped and empowered by Christ.
 - **Grammatical tone**: Passive – the body is acted upon.
 - **Example**: “The Church was built by Christ.”

- **Key Idea:** The Church is central, showing how it is formed, united, and strengthened through Christ.
- **Colossians** – *Focus on Christ, the Head of the Body*
 - Emphasizes Christ as the active Head who governs, sustains, and directs all things.
 - **Grammatical tone:** Active – Christ is the one acting.
 - **Example:** “Christ builds the Church.”
 - **Key Idea:** Christ is central, highlighting His authority and supremacy over everything.

The Colossian Heresy

The false teaching Paul confronted in Colossians was a fusion of Judaism and Gnosticism. Judaism emphasized sabbath observance, dietary laws, and circumcision. Gnosticism emphasized false humility, the worship of angels, harsh treatment of the body, and the pursuit of secret wisdom for the elite.

Gnosticism: Key Beliefs

The word Gnostic comes from the Greek 'gnosis' (knowledge). Gnostics claimed secret insight available only to a spiritual elite. They wrestled with two questions: How did creation come about? and How can evil exist if God is holy? They concluded matter was evil, opposed to God, and invented the idea of emanations flowing from God—each further from His holiness—until one created the material world. This denied Christ’s role as Creator (John 1:3) and ignored that sin brought the curse on creation (Rom. 8:20).

Ethical Outcomes of Gnosticism

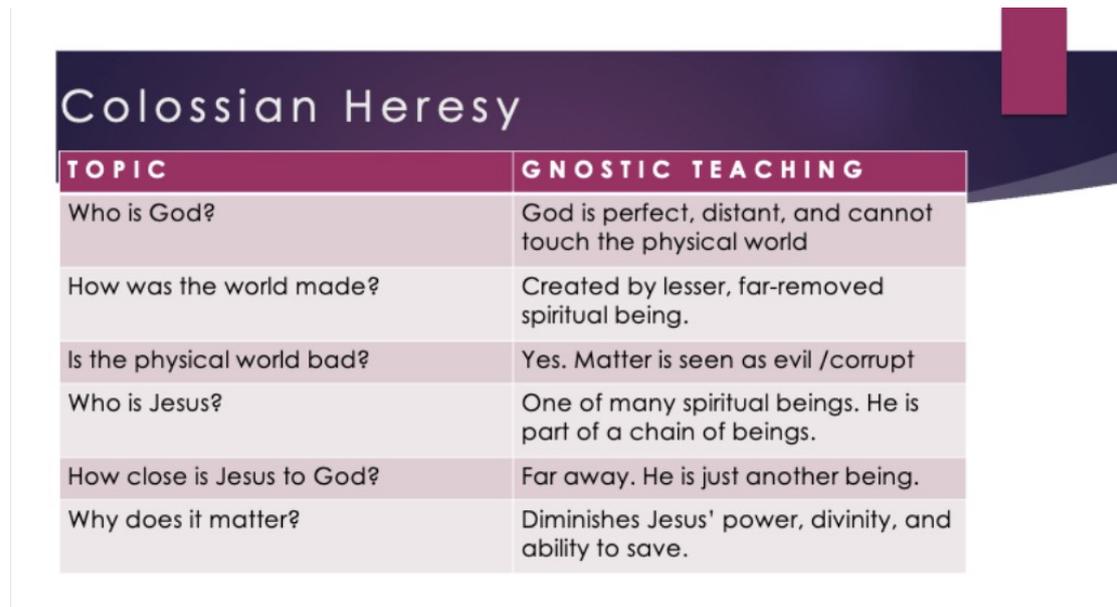
From this false philosophy came two extremes:

- Rigid Asceticism: denial of the body, severe diets, refusal of marriage, rejection

of oil for the skin.

- Unrestrained License: indulgence of every impulse, treating the body as irrelevant.

Both extremes failed—one enslaved in lifeless legalism, the other in reckless immorality. Neither produced true holiness.

A graphic titled "Colossian Heresy" featuring a table with two columns: "TOPIC" and "GNOSTIC TEACHING". The table lists six topics and their corresponding Gnostic teachings. The background is dark purple with a red square on the right side.

TOPIC	GNOSTIC TEACHING
Who is God?	God is perfect, distant, and cannot touch the physical world
How was the world made?	Created by lesser, far-removed spiritual being.
Is the physical world bad?	Yes. Matter is seen as evil /corrupt
Who is Jesus?	One of many spiritual beings. He is part of a chain of beings.
How close is Jesus to God?	Far away. He is just another being.
Why does it matter?	Diminishes Jesus' power, divinity, and ability to save.

Essenism: A Jewish Channel of Gnostic Thought

Gnosticism itself was pagan philosophy, but it entered the Colossian church through the Essenes, a Jewish sect. They blended Jewish tradition with mystical speculation and ascetic practices, producing a toxic mix. Essenes enforced strict Sabbath rules, rejected marriage, lived on bread and vegetables, denied bodily resurrection, worshipped angels and the sun, and guarded secret doctrines for an elite few. Their influence wrapped legalistic Judaism in mystical elitism, undermining the truth of Christ.

Paul's Response in Colossians

Paul's response to these errors was to exalt Christ rather than debate human philosophies. He refocused the church on Jesus' supremacy and sufficiency:

- Refutes elitist “secret wisdom” with the universality of the gospel (Col. 1:28).
- Redefines wisdom and knowledge in Christ (Col. 1:9–10; 2:3).
- Declares Christ is Creator and Head of the Church (Col. 1:16–18).
- Asserts the fullness (plērōma) of deity dwells bodily in Him (Col. 2:9).
- Contrasts false mysteries with the true mystery: Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

The Mystery of Gnosticism vs. The Mystery of Christ

Gnosticism’s mystery: secret knowledge for the few, centered on hidden rituals and speculation. Result: exclusivity and pride, leaving people in darkness.

Paul’s mystery: Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). Revealed truth for all believers. Result: inclusivity, transformation, and assurance of eternal glory.

Colossian Truth	
TOPIC	Bible Truth (Colossians)
Who is God?	God is fully involved in His creation and revealed through Christ.
How was the world made?	Created directly by Jesus
Is the physical world bad?	No. God created it and called it good.
Who is Jesus?	Fully God, the exact image of the invisible God.
How close is Jesus to God?	He is God in bodily form.
Why does it matter?	Affirms Jesus as Supreme of all.

Personal Experience: Confronting Legalism

While serving as an assistant in a women’s group, I often faced opposition from someone who taught strict observance of Jewish laws. She even claimed to be 'more Jewish' than her Jewish daughter-in-law because she kept the feasts, kosher diet, and Sabbath. When I taught on grace, she openly rebutted me—even storming out of services. Though she was rude, I chose not to return disrespect.

Leadership never corrected her, which revealed how persistent these errors can be even today. Paul, who was more Jewish than any of us could claim, made it clear that true life is in Christ's grace, not in law-keeping.

Lesson Review

1. Paul wrote Colossians with unmatched precision because heresy attacked Christ's Person.
2. Gnosticism denied Christ as Creator by teaching emanations.
3. Gnosticism led to extremes of asceticism or indulgence.
4. Essenism funneled Jewish ritual mixed with mysticism into Colossae.
5. Paul exalted Christ as Creator, Head, and fullness of God, revealing the true mystery: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Reflection and Review Questions

1. Why do you think false teaching often begins by attacking the Person of Christ?
2. Where do you see extremes of legalism or indulgence today? How does keeping Christ central guard us from both?
3. In what ways do we see Christianity mixed with mysticism or legalism in our time?
4. How does the truth 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' shape your confidence in daily life?

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