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THE SUPREMACY AND SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST:

A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS 2:13-15

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INTRODUCTION

The letter to Colossae contains some of the the most detailed descriptions of the deity of Christ found in the N.T. Evidence seems to indicate that Paul wrote the letter while under house arrest in Rome, during which he also wrote Ephesians and Philemon. Upon further examination one finds significant similarities between the letters to Colossae and Ephesus.¹ The church was being influenced by what has come to be referred to as the “Colossian Heresy.” The apostle does not directly identify the heresy but it is possible to discover its characteristics by noting the details of the polemical argument set forth in the letter (2:16-23). The letter as a whole is a well-crafted apologetic for the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. The focus of this present work is to understand how Paul's two main points in Colossians 2:13-15 help to bolster his argument for the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

The specifics of the heresy are somewhat unclear. The apostle does not specifically identify the heresy threatening the church at Colossae, nor the specific group perpetrating the heresy. It appears to be some form of “doctrinal hybrid,” which consisted of Jewish and Gnostic elements. Yamauchi refers to it as a “Judaistic gnosticism.”² Some scholars reject Pauline authorship based upon the Gnostic features described in the letter, claiming that it details a second century Gnosticism. Conversely, the elements mentioned are not as developed as that of second and third century Gnostic teaching. There is historical evidence that a “proto-gnosticism” was present in the first century and already influencing the Gentile churches.

Proposals abound in regard to the identity of the heresy and its proponents. J.J. Gunther in his work on the subject records forty-four different proposals regarding the heresy.³ Some favor a stronger

1 John B. Polhill, *Paul & His Letters*. (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 329. Polhill suggests that one-third of the content of Colossians is paralleled in Ephesians. This is not surprising considering the two cities were in the same region and would likely have faced similar circumstances.

2 Edwin Yamauchi, “Sectarian Parallels: Qumran and Colosse,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121:482 (April 1964): 141.

3 J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 3–4.

Jewish influence and others a stronger Gnostic influence.⁴ The details found in Colossians present some parallels to the Essenes of Qumran.⁵ It must be emphasized that the Colossian heresy featured distinct elements which set it apart from the Essenes of Qumran and the Gnostics of the second and third centuries. It is a unique hybrid with similarities to both groups. Clinton Arnold has argued for something similar to this hybrid view referring to it as a “Jewish-pagan syncretism.”⁶ His work regarding the Colossian heresy has shed significant light on the issue.

In addressing the issue, Paul admonishes the Colossian believers not to submit themselves to the demands of the heresy. Elements of which come into view at the end of chapter two when Paul states, “no one is to act as your judge in regard to *food* or *drink* or in respect to a *festival* or a *new moon* or a *Sabbath day*...” (2:16).⁷ This terminology hints at a form of Jewish legalism being imposed upon what was a predominately Gentile church. The first century church had already faced similar issues of Jewish legalism and the conclusion of the matter was one to which Paul had given his assent (Acts 15:1-29).⁸ The teaching which the apostle is combating here is distinct from that of the Judaizers in Acts 15.⁹ Paul characterizes the demands as “things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.” (Col. 1:17).¹⁰

The proto-gnostic aspects of the heresy included: self-abasement and severe treatment of the

4 Nijay Gupta, “New Commentaries on Colossians: Survey of Approaches, Analysis of Trends, and the State of Research,” *Themelios* 35.1 (2010): 7-14. Examples of this diversity are found in Gupta's article. He points out that “Thompson, Talbert, and Witherington generally view the philosophy as coming mainly from Judaism. Wilson, Moo, and Sumney seem to envision more of a syncretistic (Jewish and non-Jewish) philosophy” (p. 12).

5 *Ibid.*, 141.

6 C. E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). Unfortunately it is out-of-print.

7 Scripture quotation unless otherwise noted are from the New American Standard Bible 1995 edition.

8 The decision stated that the Gentile believers were to, “abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.” The reason for this is stated in the verse which follows, “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” They were to abide by these standards so they would not be unnecessarily offensive to the Jews.

9 The Judaizers were a group who were attempting to force Gentile Christians to be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law so they as Gentiles could be saved. In their minds, faith in Christ was not sufficient, it must be accompanied by adherence to the Law.

10 The Greek text has ἡ ἐστὶν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων (“which are a shadow of what is coming) with τό δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ (“but the substance/reality is Christ”).

body, worship of angels, and access to a visionary realm¹¹ (2:18, 23). The worship of angels is a feature that is debated among scholars. House argues, “this is the veneration of angels as mediatorial beings between man and God, who aid men's spiritual 'ascent.' In Greek thought the deification of astrological observances also could be what Paul was referring to, since the Greeks paid homage to the astrological forces that supposedly controlled their fate.”¹² Others interpret this as referring to worshipping God in the manner of the angels.¹³ Another indication of the proto-gnostic character of the heresy is the repetition of the Greek word μυστήριον.¹⁴ The Gnosticism of later centuries is focused on the pursuit of special knowledge (μυστήριον) which upon discovery would result in salvation. Davies suggests that three main issues interested the Gnostics, “Whence evil and by what means? Whence man and how? Whence God?”¹⁵ This pursuit of knowledge embodies the central thrust of later Gnosticism.

Paul's argument in the letter emphasizes knowledge as being found in Christ (2:6-8). The readers are urged to cling to Christ as the source of all knowledge and truth. Apparently the heretics suggested a source other than Christ where knowledge and truth could be found. In comparison the Essenes believed the Old Testament was the source of knowledge and truth and the Gnostics of later centuries believed knowledge had a soteriological quality. The heresy addressed here does not focus heavily on either of these issues.¹⁶ As would be expected from a separatist Judaistic sect, the Essenes denied the deity of Christ. Muslim historian, Shahrastani, claims that Arius (fl. 320) took his teaching

11 J. T. Milik, “Le Testament de Lévi en araméen,” *Revue Biblique*, 62:400, 1955. Visions of angels are also found in fragments of the Qumran document the *Testament of Levi*.

12 H. Wayne House, “Doctrinal Issues in Colossians” Part 1 (of 4 parts) *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (Jan.-Mar. 1992), 57.

13 Nijay Gupta, “New Commentaries on Colossians: Survey of Approaches, Analysis of Trends, and the State of Research,” *Themelios* 35.1 (2010): 7-14. Gupta writes, “A well-known conundrum in the interpretation of Colossians is whether *thrēskeia tōn angelōn* (“worship of angels”; 2:18) is to be taken as an objective genitive (angels being worshiped) or a subjective genitive (angels as worshipping God). Judging by these works, scholarship is still split quite evenly, with Thompson (66–67), Witherington (161–62), and Sumney (154–55) taking the subjective view and Wilson (222–23), Talbert (218–22), and Moo (226–27) taking the objective view.” (p. 13).

14 Raymond E. Brown, “The Semitic Background of the New Testament *Mysterion*,” *Biblica*, 39:426–48, 1958; 40:70–87, 1959. Brown concludes, “We believe it no exaggeration to say that, considering the variety and currency of the concept of divine mysteries in Jewish thought, Paul and the New Testament writers could have written everything they did about *mysterion* if there had never been pagan mystery religions.” This is significant considering how frequently μυστήριον is associated with the Gnostics.

15 W. D. Davies, “‘Knowledge’ in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Matthew 11:25–30,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 46:131, 1953.

16 Edwin Yamauchi, “Sectarian Parallels: Qumran and Colosse,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121:482 (April 1964): 146.

from the Magharia, the 'People of the Cave,' who lived four hundred years before Arius, and likely were the Essenes of Qumran.”¹⁷ The later Gnostics also denied the deity of Christ, teaching that He was God in the sense that all people had a “spark of divinity” within them. They viewed Christ as especially less than deity prior to the resurrection.

The heretical system advanced a denigration of the person and work of Christ, thus explaining the strong apologetic tone of the letter which focuses on the supremacy of Christ. The letter opposes such a system which denied the nature and work of Christ. House writes, “The problem at Colosse was a conflict between Christ and the 'elements' of the world. Colosse was a great melting pot, and as such there was probably pressure for the people there to be accommodating religiously as well as socially. Paul, however, reaffirmed Christ's preeminence and used harsh language in dealing with the heretics 'empty' philosophies.”¹⁸ If House's claim is valid, the apostle is proclaiming loyalty to Christ as being of greater importance than cultural assimilation.

Such a denial of the apostolic teaching concerning the person and work of Christ would have been devastating to the faith of the Colossians. Paul describes the implications of holding to such teaching, “... taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.” (Col. 2:18b-19). The heretics were taking their stand on visions, not on the apostolic doctrine concerning Christ (2:6-7). They are described as having *fleshly mind[s]* (2:18d), rather than minds “filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...increasing in the knowledge of God;” (1:9c, 10d).¹⁹ Ascribing to such heresy would result in apostasy from an apostolic Christology and therefore a rejection of Christ. The heretics were not “holding fast to the head,” which is Christ.

17 A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Jewish Sect of Qumran and the Essenes*, 162-63. Cited in Edwin Yamauchi, “Sectarian Parallels: Qumran and Colosse,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121:482 (April 1964): 149.

18 H. Wayne House, “Doctrinal Issues in Colossians” Part 1 (of 4 parts) *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (Jan.-Mar. 1992) 55-6.

19 Emphasis by the present author.

House describes the apostle's motive in writing, "Paul wanted the Colossians to be established in Christ Jesus and to grow in Him. Christ was to be the basis of every aspect of life. The only way to ensure this was to beseech the Colossians to reject any doctrine or teaching that did not have Christ as its bedrock."²⁰ Bruce in speaking of the Christology of Colossians states, "In the Christ hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 Christ is celebrated as the Agent of God in both creation and reconciliation. His agency in creation is attested by other New Testament writers; it is emphasized in the letter to the Colossians as part of the argument that those who have direct access to God through Christ and are united with Christ have no need to worship beings or forces, which, however powerful, are part of the created order which He brought into existence."²¹ Christ is central and any teaching which minimizes the centrality of Christ is contrary to apostolic Christianity.²²

Yamauchi concludes, "It may be that the heresy was a homegrown product of the Lycus River Valley. We do know that the heresy maintained its transitional character without developing the exaggerated excesses of later Gnosticism, for the Council which met at Laodicea (a dozen miles from Colosse) in the middle of the fourth century still found it necessary to admonish: 'It is not right for Christians to abandon the Church of God and go away and invoke angels and hold conventicles; for these things are forbidden. If therefore anyone is found devoting himself to this secret idolatry, let him be anathema, because he abandoned our Lord Jesus Christ and went after idolatry.'"²³ The inherent danger of the church falling prey to this heresy led Paul to compose the present apologetic, detailing an apostolic, orthodox Christianity. One which must be adhered to by those claiming to be members of the body of Christ.

In Colossians 2:13-15, Paul provides two evidences of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.

The apostle issues an apostolic view of Christ, which is divine in origin (2 Pet. 1:19-20). The present

20 H. Wayne House, "Doctrinal Issues in Colossians" Part 4 (of 4 parts) *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (October-December 1994), 445.

21 F.F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 4: Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (Jan. 1984) 291.

22 This point must not be understated. Altering apostolic Christology is a grievous error.

23 Edwin Yamauchi, "Sectarian Parallels: Qumran and Colosse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121:482 (April 1964): 152. Yamauchi quotes from J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, 68.

examples are intended to solidify for his readers the validity and superiority of the apostolic doctrine concerning Christ, which would result in rejecting the errors of the Colossian heresy.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEING *MADE ALIVE TOGETHER WITH CHRIST* (2:13-14)

Paul reminds the church of their spiritual condition prior to regeneration (2:13). They were in fact spiritually dead. Moule describes the pre-conversion Colossians as so, “They were once 'outside of Christ' (χωρὶς Χριστοῦ, Eph. 2:12). They were not at all 'in Him' and so indeed they were not 'filled full in Him.’”²⁴ The use of the participle ὄντας (present active participle, εἰμί) indicates the continual state of spiritual death which characterized them apart from Christ. The Colossians are characterized as, “dead in your transgressions” (ὄντας νεκροὺς ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν).²⁵ They bore guilt before God as a result of violating His moral standards. Paul also describes them as, “dead ... in the uncircumcision of your flesh” (ὄντας νεκροὺς ἐν ... καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν). The phrase τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν is employed metaphorically to describe the spiritual deadness of the Colossians apart from Christ.²⁶ It refers to the reality that they were unconcerned with pleasing God.²⁷ They were “uncircumcised” in their spiritual nature. It further defines their spiritually “deadness” (see Rom. 2:28-29).

The guilt of their transgressions and “uncircumcised flesh” resulted in spiritual separation from God. This is relevant to the overall argument of the book because the apostle explains that God *through Christ* has rectified this condition of condemnation. The Colossians have been made alive (regenerated) and have been forgiven of all their transgressions (they were *dead in their*

24 H.C.G. Moule *Colossians and Philemon Studies*, Pickering & Inglis Ltd., (London), 47.

25 BDAG gives the following gloss, “a violation of moral standards, offense, wrongdoing, sin” παράπτωμα, 770.

26 They were not spiritually dead because they were physically uncircumcised. Paul says that neither circumcision, nor uncircumcision ultimately mattered (Rom. 2:28-29; Gal. 5:2-6). In his letter to the Ephesians he says that the Gentiles were referred to by the Jews as “uncircumcision,” which he says is, “performed in the flesh by human hands” (Eph. 2:11). In Ephesians, Paul says that, “in Christ you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” not through physical circumcision (2:13). It is a metaphorical usage being utilized by Paul here to speak of spiritual “uncircumcision” because they had not yet been reconciled to God through Christ.

27 “The word is found only in biblical and ecclesiastical Greek. Comparison of the different Gk. versions of the OT shows that ἀκροβυστία and ἀκρόβυστος are used both in a literal (physical) and a metaphorical (spiritual and ethical) sense. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 1:226.

transgressions), which God has effected through Christ.²⁸ Christ is the means by which they were *made alive and forgiven* (see Eph. 2:5).²⁹ Apart from Christ they would still be dead in their transgressions and the uncircumcision of their flesh. He is central to their faith and standing with God.

In forgiving their transgressions through Christ, God “canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:14).³⁰ Apart from Christ the Colossians would remain in the guilt of their transgressions because only in Christ and His cross-work is their certificate of debt erased.³¹ The apostle wants the church at Colossae to understand that contrary to the teaching of the heretics, Christ is essential to their spiritual life – regeneration and forgiveness are not possible apart from Him.

There is debate as to what *χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν* refers. Some argue that it refers to an actual personal certificate of debt testifying of their guilt apart from Christ³². Others suggest that it refers to the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law and its obligations by Christ.³³ Harris favors the identification of the certificate of debt as the Mosaic law, though he mentions that the theories are numerous.³⁴ Vaughn also argues for the Mosaic law as the proper interpretation of

28 *συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ* “[God the Father] made you alive together with [Christ].”

29 Paul also discusses the issue of regeneration of spiritually dead people through Christ in his letter to Ephesus.

30 *ἐξάλειψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν* “Having erased the certificate of debt consisting of decrees which was opposed to us.”

31 B.D.A.G. provides the gloss, “to remove so as to leave no trace, remove, destroy, obliterate” for the verb *ἐξάλειψω*, 344. Louw and Nida write, “he will wipe out the record of our debts which were against us’ Col 2.14; ‘in order that your sins may be wiped out’ Ac 3.19.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989), 1:159. Liddel and Scott supply, “to wipe out, obliterate.” H.G. Liddell, *A Lexicon : Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), 269.

32 As in R. Mark Shipp, “‘Nailed to the Cross’: The Continuing Relevance of the Old Testament,” *Christian Studies Journal*, #23. Shipp says, “The handwriting in Col 2:14 is a ‘record of sin, kept in heaven,’ producing the ‘decrees’ (*dogmata*) leading to the punishment of the offender.’ What Christ has done is to cancel the decree of punishment levied against us.” Shipp laments what he refers to as, “the dispensational understanding of Christ fulfilling the Mosaic Law.” He claims that such an understanding leads to a loss of the relevance of the O.T. Scriptures. He fails to understand that a normative dispensational understanding of Scripture does not lead to an abandonment of the O.T.

33 In his commentary on Ephesians 2:14-15, O'Brien discusses the Mosaic law being a barrier between Jews and Gentiles. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar N.T. Commentary, (Eerdmans, 1999), 196-7.

34 Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1991), 107. Harris says, “...the Mosaic law [was] regarded as a bill of debt; or a writ of accusation regarding the Mosaic law; or the Jewish obligation to keep the Mosaic law and the Gentile obligation to keep the moral law, the one debt being acknowledged by contract (Deut. 27:9-26), the other by conscience (Rom. 2:14-16). O'Brien understands it as the Jew being guilty under the Mosaic law and the Gentile being guilty under the moral law. O'Brien, Peter T., *Colossians and Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 44 (Thomas Nelson: Columbia, 1982), 125.

χειρόγραφον.³⁵ The “certificate of debt” consists of (or *is contained in*) decrees (δόγμασιν).³⁶ The Mosaic law continually demonstrated the guilt of humanity, as they consistently failed to meet its requirements, knowingly and unknowingly (Rom. 2:12-16; 3:19-20; 4:15; Gal. 3:10-14, 19-24). As noted earlier, Christ is the means by which the Colossians were regenerated, and the means of their forgiveness. It is through Him their certificate of debt is canceled.

God has taken their certificate of debt out of the way having nailed it to the cross (καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ). Their debt has been canceled *through Christ* and His substitutionary work on the cross. Scott likens the certificate of debt to the charge “the King of the Jews,” which Pilate placed above Christ's head on the cross. He writes, “Paul boldly ignores the real superscription, and imagines the Law as nailed above the cross. This on the deeper view, was the charge on which Christ was put to death. He suffered in order to satisfy in our stead 'the indictment which was against us' and has thus set it aside.”³⁷ It is powerfully demonstrated that apart from Christ, the Colossians would still be dead in their sins and the uncircumcision of their flesh, still guilty of their transgressions, with the certificate of debt remaining in place. Apart from Christ the Colossians are utterly hopeless.

Thus concluding Paul's first evidence for the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, being made alive together with Christ. Now he proceeds to his second evidence.

35 Curtis Vaughan, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 201-2. H. Wayne House, “Doctrinal Issues in Colossians Part 2 (of 4 parts): The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (April 1992), 189.

36 “[This is] the one instance the word χειρόγραφον in the NT where it has the sense of 'promissory note': Col. 2:14. The reference is to God's pronouncement that the note which testifies against us is cancelled.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 9:435.

37 E.F. Scott, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, MNT. Edited by James Moffatt. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 47.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FACT THAT GOD *MADE A PUBLIC DISPLAY OF THE RULERS
AND AUTHORITIES THROUGH CHRIST (2:15)*

In verse 15, Paul proclaims his second evidence for the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ (2:13-15). He states that God the Father “made a public display” of the rulers and authorities (ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ). The main verb is ἐδειγμάτισεν which Louw and Nida define, “to cause someone to suffer public disgrace or shame—‘to disgrace in public, to put to shame.’”³⁸ TDNT suggests, “the sense is 'to make a public exhibition,' not by a proclamation of the κυριος but by the public display of the vanquished forces before the cosmos, possibly in a triumphal procession.”³⁹

The Colossian heresy involved the worship of angels and access to some form of visionary realm (2:18-19). House adds, “The tendency of the early Christians in Colosse to be enamored with angels is understandable in view of the important place of angels in the Old Testament and Judaism, especially mystic Judaism. Moreover, such beings were popular in Greek religion.”⁴⁰ Paul is contending that it is utter foolishness to worship angels when God has *made a public display* of the rulers and authorities (ἀρχάς καί εξουσίας).⁴¹ What is even more profound is that the verse states that God has made a public display of the rulers and authorities, θριαμβεύσας αὐτούς ἐν αὐτῷ (triumphing over them in Him). God the Father has triumphed over them in *Christ*.

The proponents of the heresy were rejecting the apostolic teaching regarding Christ.

Thus, rejecting the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. In verse 15, Paul declares that the *rulers* and

38 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989), 1:310. Liddell and Scott definite it as, “to make a show of.” H.G. Liddell, *A Lexicon : Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), 175.

39 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964 c1976), 2:31.

40 H. Wayne House, “Doctrinal Issues in Colossians” Part 2 (of 4 parts) *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (April 1992), 190.

41 This being a designation for angelic beings (see Eph. 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; Col. 1:13, 16).

*authorities*⁴² (which was terminology used at times to describe heavenly powers such as angels)⁴³ were defeated by God the Father *through Christ*. Therefore, Christ was supreme over them. Restated another way, Christ is greater than the rulers and authorities.⁴⁴ Polhill refers to this as, “Christ's total victory over the demonic powers in his death on the cross (vv.13-15). Why should the Colossians concern themselves with any spiritual powers and authorities when they belonged to Christ who ruled them all?”⁴⁵ O'Brien describes it in this way, “God exposed to the universe their utter helplessness leading them in Christ in his triumphal procession. He paraded these powerless 'powers and principalities' so that all the world could see the magnitude of his victory.”⁴⁶

The image of Christ leading the powers and authorities as captives, just as a conquering general would lead his prisoners of war through the streets of his city, conveys a powerful image. This would have been a familiar concept for the Colossians because it was a common practice of the Roman empire to do such things after a military victory.⁴⁷ Vaughan aptly describes the scene, “Christ, in this picture, is the conquering general; the powers and authorities are the vanquished enemy displayed as the spoils of battle before the entire universe. To the casual observer the cross appears only to be an

42 “In Da. 7 the reference of ἀρχαί is perhaps to supraterrrestrial and demonic powers which are subdued by the Messiah (according to NT exegesis) and which cannot therefore hurt the people of God any more. It is, of course, a long way from these national angels to the ἀρχή concept of Paul. They are spiritual beings (Eph. 6:12), related to angels according to R. 8:38. Christ has subjected them to Himself (Col. 2:15; Eph. 1:21). He has now been revealed as their Lord (Col. 2:10), as He has been from the very first as their Creator, archetype and ground of existence (Col. 1:16). This does not mean, of course, that their power is destroyed.” Quoted from the, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 1:483-484.

43 Louw and Nida posit the following information about the rulers, “Some scholars have believed that it is possible to reconstruct at least in part some of the hierarchy represented by these various supernatural forces and powers, on the basis of the neoplatonic system of nine such powers arranged in three orders of three each. NT terminology and usage does not, however, lend itself to such a classification, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what are the significant differences between these supernatural powers and forces.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996, c1989), 1:147.

44 This does not even take into account the fact that Christ is their Creator (Col. 1:16).

45 John B. Polhill, *Paul & His Letters*. (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 343.

46 Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 44 (Thomas Nelson: Columbia, 1982), 133. Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1991), 111.

47 Curtis Vaughan, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 202.

instrument of death, the symbol of Christ's defeat; Paul represents it as Christ's chariot of victory.”⁴⁸

Moule writes, “He leads His conquered enemies along, disgraced for ever before the moral universe; and thus the Cross is the triumph-chariot of this wonderful Imperator.”⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

The apostle carried a great burden for the believers at Colossae because he had not met them previously face to face. He had a deep desire to preach the gospel and present every man mature in Christ (Col. 1:29). This concern for the spiritual welfare of the church at Colossae was heightened by the presence of the Colossian heresy. These believers were in danger of being influenced by a teaching which rejected the apostolic teaching concerning Jesus Christ. Paul knew the very real danger this heresy presented and the disastrous results of succumbing to it. They would be led away from the truth, thus committing apostasy. Therefore, the apostle in an attempt to prevent such disaster from occurring writes the present letter. As previously noted, the letter is a well-crafted apologetic for the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Divinely moved, Paul communicated sound doctrine concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ, for the purpose of protecting these precious believers from the erroneous doctrines of the Colossian heresy.

The focus of the present work was on Colossians 2:13-15, in which Paul presented two main arguments: 1) God made the Colossians alive together *with Christ*; and 2) God made a public display of the rulers and authorities *through Christ*. The implications are startling. Apart from Christ, they were spiritually dead, and if they abandon Him now, they abandon the only one who can impart spiritual life. Why would they choose to believe a teaching, which would lead them away from the truth concerning Christ? The second argument concerns God the Father making a public display of the rulers and authorities, triumphing over them through Christ. The heresy involved worship of angels

48 Ibid., 202.

49 H.C.G. Moule *Colossians and Philemon Studies*, Pickering & Inglis Ltd., (London), 158. Imperator defined, “a commander in chief or emperor of the ancient Romans.” Merriam-Webster Inc, Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Includes Index., 10th ed. (Springfield, Mass., U.S.A.: Merriam-Webster, 1996, c1993).

and a visionary realm. Christ defeated, and is superior to the angelic beings (also being their Creator – Col. 1:15-16). Why would they want to settle for worship of angels when they had a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, who is superior to angels? Why would they settle for a visionary realm when, “in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Col. 2:3).

The supremacy and sufficiency of Christ is aptly demonstrated through the entire letter of Colossians and its argument is bolstered by Paul's points in Colossians 2:13-15. Christ is truly superior to the false teaching set forth in the Colossian heresy.

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