1. The place of early Christian communities in their environment

All of the letters of Paul that have come down to us (with the exception of Philemon) show him engaged in a more or less sharp controversy with opponents, more exactly, innerchurchly opponents, of his theology. This suggests that from a very early time Christianity was not a single unified phenomenon such as we sometimes suppose. The rapid expansion of the church, especially through the mission to the gentiles led by Paul, brought it about that persons with widely different backgrounds and traditions, not to mention personal hopes and expectations, were encountered by the Christian message. Their preunderstandings did not automatically change when they became Christian. Because they continued to live in the same world as before, they could not escape from their own backgrounds, whether Jewish or gentile.

When Paul (in 1 Cor 9:19-23) speaks of becoming a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks, he means that he takes account of the different presuppositions of his hearers. What his missionary preaching looked like we really have little idea; but his letters show the continuing influence of previous traditions—both pre-Christian and extra-Christian. He was evidently willing to tolerate very different forms of Christian preaching, instead of insisting on only one line.

There was, of course, a limit to his theological tolerance: certain developments in doctrine and in life became error or "heresy," for him when they became an immediate threat to the Christian confession. He was firm in his belief that the relation between God and human beings that corresponds to God's will—which he calls the "righteousness of God"—has been established through Christ alone. Therefore, this relation can be appropriated solely by faith in the saving deed that has become manifest in the cross of Jesus. "Error" arises not only where such faith is suppressed by assertions contradictory of it, where

unfaith takes the place of faith, but also where faith in Christ is supplemented by acknowledging competing norms, commandments, beliefs, laws—from whatsoever tradition they may come.

But such "supplements" are not regarded by their defenders as contradictory to faith in Christ. Early Christian "heretics" certainly did not understand themselves as enemies of the cross of Christ (as Paul calls them in Phil 3:18). Rather, they believed they had to take account of another necessary religious dimension and declare this to be obligatory for Christians. Even if such "heretics" came into Christian communities from the outside, they were undoubtedly Christians who in all honesty saw it to be their task to disseminate their understanding of the Christian message and, in doing so, to contradict what Paul had been saying. There was no authority in the early church that could have "officially" decided wherein "heresy" was to be found. When Paul speaks of "false brothers," or "false apostles," he's expressing his judgment, which may by no means have been shared by, say, the authorities in the community in Jerusalem.

Whether or not the "heretics" with whom Paul had to do in Galatia, Corinth, Philippi were all of the same type, it's clear that in one church not founded by Paul—be it Colossae or Laodicea—there developed a conflict situation comparable to that in Galatia, and that the author of Colossians reacted to it very much as Paul had reacted to the situation in Galatia, without, however, repeating the themes of that earlier conflict (law, justification).

We know of the founding of the Colossian or Laodicean church only what can be learned from Colossians itself. But we do know that Asia Minor in the first century after Christ was a veritable playground for the most different kinds of religious movements—including the indigenous cults, partially transformed by

mystery religions; the ever-growing world-denying movement of Gnosticism; a strong Judaism (Paul himself presumably stemmed from Asia Minor); and the traditional Greek religions, transformed by the religiosity of the Near East and Asia Minor. In such a climate, the congregations in Colossae and Laodicea presumably developed. Is it any wonder that currents soon became powerful that were judged to be highly dangerous by those who came out of the missionary work of Paul or stood close to its tradition.

2. The teaching of the opponents attacked in Colossians

We have no direct witnesses to the preaching of the "heretics" who were active in Colossae (or Laodicea, or both?). Our only source for the "Colossian heresy" is Colossians itself—rather as though the only source we possessed for reconstructing the church struggle in Germany during the Nazi time were the Barmen Declaration of 1934. From the text of this declaration, the teaching of the "German Christians" whom it attacks cannot be completely reconstructed, even though its outlines can be drawn sufficiently insofar as one has at least some notion of the political and spiritual situation of the time in general. But beyond this formal parallel, there are also certain material similarities between the Barmen Declaration and Colossians.

The persons whose teaching Colossians attacks call their teaching "philosophy"—not, however, in the modern sense of a view based upon reason and understanding, but in the ancient sense in which the concept could allow for a certain amount of religiosity and mysticism as well as magic and superstition. As such, it was evidently directed toward a comprehensive explanation of the world, and was represented by teachers who evidently understood it as a legitimate form of the Christian message and who, therefore, saw themselves occupying a place <u>within</u> the church, not <u>alongside</u>, much less <u>against</u>, it.

These Christian "philosophers" in Colossae (or Laodicea) were evidently influenced by certain Jewish customs and called for their observance, e.g., circumcision, dietary customs, and religious feast days. Of course, the whole of early Christianity was powerfully under the influence of Judaism. But we know that Paul had fought hard for the freedom of Gentile Christians from the law and had grounded this theologically in his doctrine of the righteousness of God, which comes, not from observing the law, but solely through faith in Christ (Rom 3:28), who is "the end of the law" (Rom 10:4). The consequence of Paul's theological position was that any attempt to bring Gentile Christians under certain norms of the law endangered faith in Christ in an elementary way. This alone explains Paul's sharp response to the situation in Galatia; and this is also the basis for the massive polemic of Colossians against the "Colossian philosophy."

But there's no reason to exclude Gnostic elements as well, since Jewish and Gnostic developments had long since been interconnected. In fact, it's often assumed—probably correctly—that one of the sources of Gnosticism was a "marginalized" Judaism, where creation and salvation were no longer held together. Thoroughly non-Jewish, in any event, is reverence toward angels, which would appear to be more at home in some form of Hellenistic religiosity. Also non-Jewish is the special attention given to "the rudiments of the world" (2:8) and "powers and principalities" (2:10, 15). Could this be due to some influence from the mystery religions, whose terminology is in any case evident in 2:18?

This mixture of Jewish traditions, Gnostic thinking, elements from the mystery religions—all in the context of faith in Christ—seems to be a religious movement <u>sui generis</u>, more or less without any clear parallel, especially in the

theological "heresies" with which Paul himself seems to have had to do, notwithstanding certain obvious agreements (such as the demand to observe religious festivals [cf. Col 2:16 with Gal 4:8 ff.]).

As a group within the Christian community, the chief interest of the Colossian "philosophers" appears to have been to supplement, or support, the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Lord, which they in no way questioned. Through certain cultic practices, through religiously motivated observance of certain moral, especially ascetic, norms, and through a religious reverence for angels and the worldly elements they sought to achieve the "perfection," or "completion" that faith in Christ would otherwise lack. The result was that these "supports," or "supplements" obscured faith in Christ, and that Christ himself was made a kind of cult god, who had a place in a given context of cosmic "powers and principalities," to which human beings were subject.

If we ask how such a doctrine could have developed in Colossae (or in Laodicea), the answer seems simple enough: A major factor in all religiousness is the striving for security in an uncertain world, the striving for a complete understanding and thus also a mastery of this world, which is experienced as so threatening. Christian faith mediated to persons in late antiquity the knowledge that they had been extricated from this world through Christ's death and resurrection, and Paul especially emphasized that, on the basis of their faith, Christians could now turn toward this world as free men and women. But the real threats that human beings experienced themselves as exposed to in the world did not seem to have been overcome. Thus when Paul enumerates all the "powers" that cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:38 f.), it becomes clear that there must have been real fear of such a separation from God being brought about by death or life, angels or archangels, present or

future, etc. It was in face of just this fear that the "Colossian philosophy" promised relief—by proposing that we satisfy the claims of all these powers against us, so as thereby to escape any danger from them.

As for the claim that the "Colossian philosophy" was the religious outlook of an upper social class, which stood to gain from the lower class's submission to the worldly powers, there is no evidence to support it. More than that, there's no reason why members of lower social classes should accept such teaching unless their needs for it were the same as those of the imagined higher social group. But, then, the real field of the heresy, as of the attack against it, is not society but religion.

3. The protest of Colossians against the "Colossian philosophy"

The author of Colossians wrote his letter so that his readers could compare their own situation with that of the church in Colossae and that Paul's word in that situation could also be understood as directed to them. To this end, he had no need to describe the "Colossian philosophy" in any great detail, since his original readers would have already been familiar enough with it. On the other hand, he did try to write his letter as, in his opinion, Paul himself would have written it, so that it would come across credibly as what Paul would have "once" said and also be recognized by his readers as pertinent to their own situation. Although Colossians is not an occasional writing, it is also not a theological treatise, or "dogmatics in outline," such as we find in Ephesians, which has no concrete audience.

The author presumably comes out of the congregation for which his letter was intended. In any case, he is not so far distant from what he criticizes as "heresy." Like his opponents, he represents a "cosmological" understanding of Christ, according to which Christ has to do with the worldly demonic powers and

principalities. He is also as persuaded as his opponents are that Christians have to strive for "perfection," or "completion," and he speaks, as they do, of the "fullness" and of "wisdom." On the other hand, contents that were essential to Paul's theology are completely missing here: the doctrine of justification, disputation concerning the correct understanding of the law, and talk about a real eschatological future. Also missing are any references, citations, and allusions involving the Old Testament. Therefore, there was nothing in the author's situation that made this kind of argumentation necessary, although this need not qualify the conclusion that the "Colossian philosophy" betrays signs of Jewish influence.

The author's argument is determined less by his own Pauline tradition than by the tendencies of the heresy he is opposing. But, while he remains more or less within the limits set by his opponents, he argues (in a good Pauline way) in expressly christocentric terms: his decisive weapon in his struggle against the heresy is his emphatic and oft-repeated references to the lordship of Christ.

While the author, like his opponents, sees Christ in the context of the "principalities and powers," it is his position that Christ has already completely conquered and definitively subjected all of these powers. For this reason, he infers that there is an alternative in principle between acknowledging "the rudiments of the world," on the one hand, and faith in Christ, on the other (2:8). For this reason, he corrects the hymn in 1:18 and says that it is the church, not the cosmos, that is Christ's "body."

Like the mystery religions, the author sees Christians in a mystical union with the risen Christ that is mediated through baptism. But this for him is the breaking in of a new reality, so that all of the reverencing of angels and demons accompanying faith in Christ are absolutely excluded (2:15, 18). For the author,

like his opponents, it is clear that human beings are guilty before God and in need of forgiveness (cf. 2:13 f.). But this knowledge is combined with the certainty that God has already atoned for human guilt in the cross of Jesus and that, therefore, no religious exertions are any longer required in order to be reconciled to God.

His principal claim against his opponents is that they do not hold "to the head," i.e., Christ (2:19), because they do not accept the occurrence of the cross as the definitive actualization of salvation. He charges his opponents, for all of their apparent emphasis on "wisdom," with really being concerned with the "flesh" (2:18, 23), i.e., with satisfying their own subjective religious interests and needs. Finally, he claims that their teaching derives from human tradition (2:8, 22) and thus does not correspond to what God has revealed.

The author calls upon the Colossian Christians to not allow themselves to be forced onto the way of religious accomplishments. He admonishes them, each in his or her place (cf. the Haustafeln), to accept the reality of Christ in faith and to act in life accordingly. By so stressing the present reality of salvation, he is in danger of losing sight of the future. But it would be a mistake to portray the author as a "religious enthusiast" because of this genuine and by no means wholly safe surrender of the "eschatological reservation." His emphasis on the present reality of salvation is grounded in the intention of making the Christ-occurrence the definitive standard for life. The letter to the Colossians is polemical writing, not a balanced, fully developed systematic theology. He stresses certain things while neglecting others, such as, in particular, eschatology. In any event, one ought not to overlook that the apostle who is represented as the author of the letter is not some "hero" who has already put earthly things behind him and is even now leading a "heavenly existence," but one who is imprisoned in chains and who speaks of the liberating lordship of Christ from this vantage

point. The letter does indeed lack the dialectic of "already now" (of justification) and "not yet" (of eschatological salvation) (Rom 5:1; Rom 1:1-6) But it is only the concept that is lacking, finally, not the thing itself. For the parenesis of the letter (3:5-4:6) binds the already "risen" Christians to the reality of the world (3:1-4). And the picture of Paul in the letter shows that Christian life does not consist in fleeing from the world but in holding out within it—even though it is indeed true that this world, as represented by angels and powers, is already conquered by Christ (2:15) and therefore can no longer touch the Christian.

Thus, for all of its differences from Paul, the Letter to the Colossians is a living witness to Christ from a highly instructive theological controversy in the early church. Whether it made any actual difference in Colossae (or in Laodicea), we do not know. But we do know that the letter was accepted and preserved by the community that first read it, else we wouldn't have received it from them. And not long after it was composed, it became the foundation for a more comprehensive writing, the Letter to the Ephesians, whose author further developed the writing to Colossae both literarily and theologically.

The theological protest of Colossians against the "Colossian philosophy" was followed up many centuries later in a completely different, and yet thoroughly comparable, situation—namely, by the Barmen Declaration of the German Evangelical Church on 31 May 1934. The false doctrine repudiated by this declaration had certain similarities to the "Colossian philosophy." In it, too, Yes to Christ was set in the context of a "but also"; and experiences of a historical kind or from nature were interpreted religiously and acknowledged as supplementary sources of revelation. The Barmen Declaration answered with an emphatic confession of Jesus Christ very much like that of Colossians. Both documents set over against the heretical "as well as also" a sharp "either/or."

The heresy of the German Christians rejected by Barmen had relativized the confession to Christ's lordship even as had the "Colossian philosophy," limiting it to only some part of life. Both documents bear witness, on the contrary, to the truth that Christ's claim to lordship embraces all realms of life and that he bestows liberation precisely therein. It thus appears that even in the conflicts of our own time the witness to Christ borne in Colossians has far greater actuality than we might have been wont to allow.