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## Nigeria, the Colossae of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### *Le Nigeria, Colosses du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle*

Ijasini Jamare Jantiku<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

The greatest threat to the church has never been persecution but heresy; the former impacts the church from without while the latter affects the church from within. Also, it can be established that persecution targets the body while heresy targets the soul of the individual. Heresy is as old as the church and keeps developing down the lane of the history of the church. Most books of the New Testament and the writings of the early church fathers were responses to some of the heretic teachings that prevailed during their time. This paper aims to make some form of comparative analyses on the heretic teachings and in Colossae and Nigeria respectively and to achieve this, this paper adopts an exegetical approach. This paper argues that Nigeria is a similitude or a typology of the church in Colossae that was contending with heresies that ranged from Jewish mysticism, Greek philosophies, Emperor worship, mystery religions and the likes. Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is faced with positive confession, prosperity gospel, deification of humans, sales of mantles, and prophetic materials. The thesis of this paper holds that the stern warning of apostle Paul in Colossians 2:8 is as relevant to the church of Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was to the church of Colossae of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Colossae, heresy, false teachings, philosophy, church

#### Résumé

La plus grande menace pour l'église n'a jamais été la persécution, mais l'hérésie ; la première affecte l'église de l'extérieur, tandis que la seconde l'affecte de l'intérieur. On peut également établir que la persécution vise le corps tandis que l'hérésie vise l'âme de l'individu. L'hérésie est aussi ancienne que l'église et continue à se développer tout au long de l'histoire de l'église. La plupart des livres du Nouveau Testament et des écrits des premiers pères de l'église étaient des réponses à certains enseignements hérétiques qui prévalaient à leur époque. Le présent article vise à effectuer une analyse comparative des enseignements hérétiques à Colosses et au Nigeria respectivement et, pour ce faire, il adopte une approche exégétique. Cet article soutient que le Nigeria est une similitude ou une typologie de l'église de Colosses qui était confrontée à des hérésies allant du mysticisme juif aux philosophies grecques, en passant par le culte de l'empereur, les religions mystérieuses et d'autres encore. Au 21<sup>e</sup> siècle, le Nigeria est confronté à la confession positive, à l'évangile de la prospérité, à la déification des hommes, à la vente de manteaux et de matériaux prophétiques. La thèse de cet article est que l'avertissement sévère de l'apôtre Paul dans Colossiens 2 :8 est aussi pertinent pour l'église du Nigeria au 21<sup>ème</sup> siècle qu'il l'était pour l'église de Colosses au 1<sup>er</sup> siècle.

**Mots-clés :** Nigeria, Colosse, hérésie, faux enseignements, philosophie, église

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## Introduction

The most common paradigm for interpreting Colossians has been as a work primarily directed against an intrusive “heresy” that was threatening a Pauline community. This approach to the epistle is a remnant of an interpretive paradigm that better reflects the worldview of the later church than that of the author of Colossians. The vestige of this ecclesiastical interpretive framework has negatively influenced historical research. An examination of the internal and external evidence on this issue will provide the basis for exploring an alternative paradigm for interpreting the epistle. This paper argues that the heretical teachings and concepts that existed in the church of Colossae in the first century AD is existent in the Nigerian church of the twenty first century AD although not in explicit form but in a modified form. The existence of numerous forms of false teachings today presents Nigeria as the Colossae of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The anchor text for this research is Colossians 2:8, an exegesis of this text will be carried out to foster better understanding of the text within its context.

## Background of Colossae

The church in Colossae was not founded by Apostle Paul but by Epaphras, a member of the Pauline circle.<sup>2</sup> The epistle of Paul to the Church in Colossae is one of the shortest of the epistles written by Paul. The church this epistle addresses was an infant church situated in the Lycus valley in Phrygia of the Province of Asia.

## The Citizens of Colossae

The ancient city of Colossae was situated 100 miles east of Ephesus in Phrygia on the southern bank of the river Lycus (in modern Turkey), and its fertile valley produced large crops of figs and olives.<sup>3</sup> The city was highly industrious and commercial but was later reduced to a small town during the Roman times. Colossae was surpassed by Laodicea and Hierapolis which were also situated in the Lycus valley. The commercial importance of Colossae was lost when Laodicea was established in the third century BC by the Seleucid king (Antiochus II), who named the city after his wife, Laodice.<sup>4</sup> Colossae along with Laodicea and Hierapolis were destroyed by earthquake in 17 AD during the reign of Tiberius and again in 60 AD during the reign of Nero. By 400 AD, Colossae no longer existed as a city.<sup>5</sup>

Colossae’s population comprised mainly of indigenous Phrygian and Greek settlers, but according to Josephus, the famous Jewish historian, more than two thousand Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia were settled in Lydia and Phrygia by Antiochus III in the second century BC. So, it is adequate to say that the Colossae of Paul’s day seems to have been a cosmopolitan place in which different cultural and religious people stayed and mingled together.<sup>6</sup>

## The Church at Colossae

The believers in Colossae were addressed as faithful brothers and sisters in Christ (Col 1:2). However, they were not converted by the Apostle Paul himself. Their conversion resulted from the impact of the vigorous missionary and evangelistic activity in Ephesus. It is from this activity that the church of Colossae was founded. Paul’s evangelistic dialogues were held in

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<sup>2</sup> P. T O’Brien “Colossians, Letter to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid, eds, (Downers Groove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 147.

<sup>3</sup> O’Brien, 147

<sup>4</sup> David Padfield, *Bible land History: Exploring the Lands of the Bible* “the church at Colossae in Asia Minor. [www.biblelandhistory.com/turkey/colosse.html/](http://www.biblelandhistory.com/turkey/colosse.html/) accessed 21<sup>st</sup> October, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Padfield

<sup>6</sup> O’Brien, 147

hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus and the apostle was not able to go to Colossae in the upper valley of the Lycus.<sup>7</sup> Luke wrote that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:10). Paul, nevertheless, had people who worked with him through whom a number of churches were planted in Asia. Epaphras, who is believed to be a native of Colossae (Col. 4:12) may have become a Christian in one of Paul's visits to Ephesus, brought the awareness of the Christian faith to the other cities situated in Lycus valley such as Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae.

Colossae was a pagan town. With its inhabitants predominantly Gentiles, the population of Colossae was godless and hostile to the things of God. The congregation of those who had received Christ Jesus in this locality was challenged by the deceptive and hollow philosophies of Paul's time. It is these philosophies that Paul seeks to address in this epistle.

### The Occasion of the Epistle

The epistle of Paul to the Church in Colossae is one among the epistles that Paul wrote from prison. Epaphras had informed Paul of the progress of the gospel in the Lycus valley. He also drew Paul's attention to the danger of the heretical teaching that was prevalent in Colossae which was potent enough to place the church in spiritual bondage. Paul's epistle to the Colossians is written as a response to this urgent need. Perhaps Epaphras found it difficult to cope with the specious and philosophical argument of those spreading the teaching and needed the greater wisdom of the Apostle who was a renowned philosopher.<sup>8</sup>

### Exegesis of Colossians 2:8

8 βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν·

#### Provisional Translation

*Maintain a constant watch lest anyone takes you captive through a seductive type of philosophy that is hollow and deceptive and that comes from mere human tradition and whose focus is on the elemental spirits of the universe and not on the one source of divine revelation and depository of divine truth – Christ himself.*

The exegesis of this text will be done phrase by phrase to bring out the true meaning of the text and to investigate the very intent of the author.

#### βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται

βλέπετε is present active imperative, 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural of βλέπω which means 'see', 'See to it', 'take care'. It carries a symbol of command or instruction. ἔσται is a third person future indicative of the irregular verb εἶμι which is a verb 'to be'. When βλέπω is followed by a clause that defines the act or condition to be avoided, it is usually followed by μή/ and the aorist subject, but here, exceptionally, it is followed by future indicative ἔσται. This tends to make the danger more imminent and the warning more urgent.<sup>9</sup> Although μή// can be seen as introducing a cautious assertion: "take heed".

#### ὁ συλαγωγῶν

This is a masculine nominative singular (which agrees with τις) of the present active participle of συλαγωγῶν which means carry off, lead (αγω) as booty or captive (συλημα). Other nuances

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, 147

<sup>8</sup> O'Brien 148

<sup>9</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Exegetical guide to the Greek New Testament: Colossians & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 91.

for the word are ‘kidnap’, ‘exploit’, ‘take captive’, ‘make a prey of’.<sup>10</sup> Apostle Paul probably has a specific individual in mind, the foremost advocate or a vocal proponent of the erroneous philosophy, who could at any time carry the Colossians away from the truth into error and consequent slavery. The dramatic juxtaposition, τις ὑμᾶς (where the normal word order would have been μή τις ἔσται ὑμᾶς), highlights the real peril of this erroneous philosophy.<sup>11</sup> The present tense of the participle is timeless and could refer either to a single act or a repeated action. The literal translation could mean “take care lest there will be anyone who will carry you off as spoil.”

#### **διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης**

In this clause, there are two nouns that are in the genitive case, after διὰ comes φιλοσοφίας -ας, ἡ, (philosophy) and ἀπάτης, -ας, ἡ (deception, deceitfulness) which expresses the means by which by which the Colossians would be captured. It was used among Jewish writers in the sense of teaching, more of an intellectual movement.<sup>12</sup> The single preposition and article qualifying both nouns suggest that one conceptual entity, not two, is being named and therefore that καὶ is epex. This means “through hollow and deceptive philosophy or through a philosophy which is empty deceit.” Apostle Paul here is not making emphasis on philosophy in general or the Greek philosophy specifically but on the so-called philosophy which is false and has a mere appearance of wisdom.<sup>13</sup> The apostle does not condemn all philosophy but the philosophy of the Judaic-oriental heretics at Colossae, which afterwards developed into Gnosticism.

#### **κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων,**

The phrase qualifies φιλοσοφίας not συλαγωγῶν. κατὰ \ sets forth the basis or the source of the “philosophy” and “the tradition of humans.” The word παράδοσιν signifies the tradition which was handed down or passed down from one generation to the other. There is a philosophy which is a noble exercise of our reasonable faculty, but there is a philosophy which is vain and deceitful.<sup>14</sup> τῶν ἀνθρώπων is a genitive masculine plural which expresses possession and buttresses the fact that the tradition emanated or originated from humans and was handed down by humans to fellow humans and not animals or things. The Jews governed themselves by the tradition of their elders while the Greeks/Gentiles mixed their Christian principles with their maxims of philosophy. The false teachers boasted of a higher wisdom in theory transmitted by tradition among the initiated; in practice they enjoy asceticism, as though matter and the body were the source of evil. Phrygia (where Colossae is situated) had a propensity for the mystical and magical which appeared in their worship of Cybele and subsequent Montanism.<sup>15</sup>

#### **κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν·**

τὰ στοιχεῖα is a constituent element of a series. The primary meaning is to line things up or set them out in a row. κατὰ στοιχεῖα, means the order of the letters, or elementary things. It could also refer to elemental powers or cosmic spirits in Hellenistic syncretism or, more probably, elementary teaching.<sup>16</sup> The Greek expression στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (basic principles of the world) is dealt with in several places in scripture. Paul deals with it at some length in

<sup>10</sup> Harris, 92

<sup>11</sup> Harris, 92

<sup>12</sup> Cleon L. Rogers Jr & Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 464.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, 92

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary in one volume*, Leslie F. Church, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), 1871 – 1872.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *Commentary, Practical and explanatory on the whole bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), 1320.

<sup>16</sup> F. F. Bruce, ed. *New International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 1456.

Galatians 4:3 & 9. They are like the elementary principles or the ABCs of the world. Harris gives four principal meanings of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου:

First, the element of which the universe is composed (2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:10). Second, the element forces operating in the world. Third, the elementary teachings of the world (teaching about the universe, teachings restricted to this world, teachings regarding materialistic matters, and teaching possessed by humankind), Fourth, the elementary spirit of the world (spirits belonging to this world/ universe, spirits that operate in the world, or spirits that control the world).

Paul uses philosophical language in his letters but the very source of his knowledge is God's revelation in Christ and not the finite human reasoning of philosophers.<sup>17</sup> The influence of philosophy as a discipline permeated the ancient world because it grappled especially with moral and ethical issues. New Christians in the culture now struggling with the same question would naturally be interested in the ideas of these philosophers. But Apostle Paul affirms that the simple message of Christ is much more profound than the greatest secular wisdom could be.

Stoics spoke of deity as being filled by all things, usually in a pantheistic sense; Greek-speaking Jewish writers modified this language to refer to God's rule encompassing all things. For Philo, the fullness can be the sum total of the powers manifesting God's rule, denoting God's all sufficiency in himself; much later Jewish mystics spoke of the heavens around God's throne as his fullness. Other Jewish writings spoke of God's Spirit, wisdom or glory filling the world, as in the Old Testament, which may be more to the point here.

### The Colossian Heresy

There is nowhere in the epistle where apostle Paul lucidly stated the term "Colossian Heresy" but the very idea of heresy can be detected by piecing together and interpreting his counter arguments. The young converts in Colossae were under external pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their Jewish and pagan neighbors.<sup>18</sup> This pressure is set forth as philosophy that is based on tradition (Col. 2:8) which was supposed to impact knowledge of the elementary spirits of this world. But Paul reveals that all the fullness of the Godhead dwelled in Christ.

The heresy seems to be Jewish because of the mention of Jewish traditions such as food regulations, observance of the Sabbath, prescription of Jewish calendar, and circumcision. This paper will argue extensively on the Jewish and philosophical background to the Colossian Heresy. This Judaism, apparently not the straightforward kind as witnessed in the Galatian church, was one in which asceticism<sup>19</sup> and mysticism<sup>20</sup> were featured and where the worship of angels and principalities played a major role in creation and giving of the law.<sup>21</sup> The Colossian heresy ranges from philosophy, pagan mystery cult (mystery religion), and

<sup>17</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 575.

<sup>18</sup> O'Brien, 148

<sup>19</sup> Which is the suppression of bodily passions because of their connection with matter. Asceticism comes from the Greek word "askesi" and refers to a system of spiritual discipline whose chief preoccupation is the renunciation of the world and the flesh as part of the great struggle against the devil. It has taken different forms, but the main tradition is characterized by the three principles of poverty, chastity and obedience. Poverty is the abandonment of the world's goods, chastity is the refusal of the pleasure of the flesh and obedience is the spiritual submission to the director or a rule of life.

<sup>20</sup> Mysticism is not the same as magic, clairvoyance, parapsychology or occultism, nor does it consist in a preoccupation with sensory images, visions or special revelations. Mysticism is popularly known as becoming one with God or the absolute, it may also refer to any kind of ecstasy or altered state of consciousness which is given a religious or spiritual meaning.

<sup>21</sup> O'Brien "Colossians, letter to the," 149

syncretism,<sup>22</sup> the worship of angels (angelic worship) was regarded as a pagan element in the false teaching. In Paul's reply to this false teaching, he expounds the doctrine of the cosmic Christ more fully (Col. 1:15-20; 2:13-15). No wonder Colossians is regarded as the most Christological of Paul's writings. Paul also laid emphasis on realized eschatology.<sup>23</sup>

### An Overview of the Deceitful Philosophies of Colossae

The word "philosophy" has the meaning of "loving wisdom." It is interesting that Paul would bring up the subject of philosophy here. History teaches that philosophy had its beginning not too many miles from Colossae at the city of Miletus. Here the pre-Socratic philosopher Thales (c. 634 BC- c. 546 BC) was said to have been its originator. This is a world view, an endeavor to take all existing knowledge of the universe and human experiences and correlate it into a form or system of thought.<sup>24</sup> In the Greco-Roman world, there were numerous systems of philosophies and these today are a religion just as it was in the New Testament.

Some think that Paul is opposed to philosophy but that is certainly not the case. What he is opposed to is pseudo-philosophy. There is something about philosophy and its high-sounding wisdom that greatly appeals to the fallen flesh. Paul says that it depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world. Paul's warning against false philosophy is stern. Below are some of the possible philosophies that existed in Colossae during Paul's time.

**Stoicism:** This school was established by Zeno of Citium (336-263 B.C). He did not recognize a personal god and thought that the universe was governed by a universal soul, a divine reason, and that man attain to his fullest potential by living in accord to this reason.<sup>25</sup> The goal of the stoics was complete self-control. They tried to live above emotion and were unmoved by the things that went on around them. They depended on their initiative since no supreme being was there to help them actualize their goals. Since the stoics believed that the world was controlled by reason, then all these are as they should be and no human activity should alter the course of nature even though such a position led to extreme fatalism.<sup>26</sup> Paul's home city Tarsus in Cilicia became a center for Stoic teaching, and no doubt Paul knew well the tenets of this philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Apostle Paul encountered the stoics along with Epicureans on the Areopagus (Mars Hills) in Acts 17:18 and it is most likely that people who invited Paul to return again were the Stoics because the things that Paul said must have been appealing to them since the content of his message was familiar to them. The teachings about Jesus Christ would have been attractive to them since they were looking for a person in whom their ideals would be found.<sup>28</sup>

**Epicureanism:** This philosophy originally grew out of the teachings of Cyrenais about a century before Epicurus. Cyrenais taught that pleasure is the only real good.<sup>29</sup> This school of thought was established by Epicurus who founded a philosophical school in Athens in 306 BC. He was a man of good character and he gathered around him a group of students who later

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<sup>22</sup> "Syncretism" this is the fusion of more than one religious practice into one. The term in Christian writing has generally referred to the replacement or dilution of the essential truth of the Gospel through the incorporation of none Christian elements like Gnosticized Judaism and Pagan elements.

<sup>23</sup> "Eschatology" is a compound Greek word *esxato* (last things) and *logo* (study), this term means the study of last things which contains information about the Parousia (rapture) and the second coming of Christ.

<sup>24</sup> William W. Stevens, *A Guide for New Testament Study* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1977), 46.

<sup>25</sup> Robert S. Burney, *New Testament Introduction, Vol.1: The Four Gospels* (Ibadan: Bezekos Printing Press, 1990), 41.

<sup>26</sup> Burney, 41-42

<sup>27</sup> Richard L. Niswonger, *New Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 80.

<sup>28</sup> Danny, McCain, *Notes on New Testament Introduction* (Bukuru: Acts, 2011), 20.

<sup>29</sup> McCain, 18



adopted his name. He was suspicious of abstract terms, made sensation the test of truth, and developed a materialistic view of the universe.<sup>30</sup> The highest good according to Epicurus is found in the pursuit of pleasure and happiness. His philosophy of happiness is built in terms of tranquility and not on sensual terms. He admitted the possibility of the existence of gods but disprove their involvement in human affairs. Apostle Paul encountered these philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:18). They were among the philosophers that came to mount Areopagus. They were the ones who despised and scorned him because the message of Paul about the suffering of Jesus Christ was a height of folly and contradicted their beliefs.

**Cynicism:** This philosophical school of thought was founded by Antisthenes who was an older contemporary of Plato and also a disciple of Socrates. Socrates had taught that a man with simple need could survive in extreme circumstances. Ensuing from this understanding, the cynics contended that the ideal would be to have no needs at all since humans are a product of nature, they should live as close to nature as possible.<sup>31</sup> Their teaching leaned on the understanding that the supreme good lies in pure and rational conduct, and the suppression of all human desires. Cynic which means “dog like” was a name that was formed by the famous disciple of Antisthenes called Diogenes who taught that humans should live simply as dogs. Extreme frugality when exercised could make humans independent of externals and thereby attain true happiness.<sup>32</sup>

**Platonism:** This school of thought was established by Plato (427-347 BC), a disciple and friend of the famous philosopher Socrates. His ideas and philosophy were not too prevalent in the world of Jesus but they existed in the world of Jesus and the New Testament world at large. It exerted an influence on the later development of Christian thoughts and dualism found in platonic thought influenced Gnosticism which was prevalent during the New Testament times. According to platonic thoughts, the objects of the visible world are only imperfect copies of universal pattern or ideas.<sup>33</sup> Reality according to Plato is found in the world of ideas of which the material world is but a shadow. This concept explains that the world of ideas is the real world that is replicated in the physical world.<sup>34</sup>

**Eclecticism:** Eclectics were philosophers who existed in the first century and who did not build their philosophy on any particular philosophy. Instead they selected what they felt was the best features of various philosophical ideas and used it to build their own philosophy. Seneca, an adviser in the court of Nero was a renowned eclectic who called himself a stoic but drew heavily from Platonism and Epicureanism as well as any other philosophical thoughts that were appealing to him at that time.<sup>35</sup> Another prolific eclectic was Philo of Alexandria. He was noted for his attempt to combine philosophy and the revealed religion of the Jews (Judaism) by using the allegorical method to show that all that the revealed religion expresses are the same with what the philosophers believed and taught.<sup>36</sup>

**Gnosticism:** This term is derived from the Greek word γνῶσις which means knowledge. Gnosticism, as the name implies, is used to designate a group of philosophical systems claiming to possess a special kind of knowledge, the possession of which would produce salvation.<sup>37</sup> A colloquium of scholars that met at Messina in Italy in 1966 defined Gnosticism as the religious systems that developed in the early centuries of the Common Era.<sup>38</sup> It is also used to describe a pattern of religious thought, often with Jewish and Christian elements. Gnostic thinking was

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<sup>30</sup> Burney, 41

<sup>31</sup> Burney, 42

<sup>32</sup> Burney, 42

<sup>33</sup> Burney, 40

<sup>34</sup> Brown, 88

<sup>35</sup> Burney, 42

<sup>36</sup> Burney, 42

<sup>37</sup> Burney, 43

<sup>38</sup> Sean Martin, *The Gnostics: The first Christian Heretics* (Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2006), 16.

based on the belief that there are two worlds: the world of spirits where God is, which is pure and holy, and the world of matter, where humans are, which is evil and corrupted. Since God is holy and pure and resides in the world of the spirits, He does not have anything to do with the world. Salvation is irrelevant in the world of matter, and the best chance is to escape the world of matter to the world of the spirit where fulfillment and satisfaction can be experienced and this is only possible by death when the soul leaves the body. Plato's dualistic contrast between the invisible world of ideas and the visible world of matter form a substratum of first century Gnosticism. It started to take shape late in the first century and equated matter with evil and spirit with good.<sup>39</sup> According to Robert H. Gundry, this equation produced two opposite modes of conduct which are: asceticism and libertinism or sensualism.

The brain behind this concept was Simon Magnus (i.e., "the Sorcerer") known from Acts 8 in the New Testament.<sup>40</sup> Most of the heresiologists consider Simon as the first gnostic and the founder of the sect. Menander, the disciple of Simon distributed the gnostic teaching to Saturninus of Antioch and Basilides of Alexandria. With the help of this lineage, the beginning and expansion of Gnosticism was explained for centuries in the orthodox ecclesiastical tradition.<sup>41</sup>

It seems unlikely that the group was organized in the New Testament period but several New Testament books seems to refer to notions that later became central to such gnostic thinking. It is obvious that such ideas were floating around independently in the religious atmosphere of the earlier Hellenistic age in which Apostle Paul lived and ministered.<sup>42</sup> Robert S. Burney states that Gnosticism was more a religion than a philosophy for the following reasons: First, while it did not become fully developed until the second century, there were beliefs that could be classed as gnostic and were current during the first century, some of which are reflected in the New Testament writings. Second, Gnosticism was based on a philosophical dualism similar to the dualism that characterized platonic idealism.

Clearly, several of the heresies Paul combated in his various epistles bear resemblance to later, more fully developed Gnostic thought. Most scholars, therefore, use terms like proto-Gnosticism or incipient Gnosticism to speak of the various Gnostic-like ideas that developed throughout the first century. They reserve Gnosticism proper for the schools of such second-century teachers as Basilides and Valentinus, and perhaps the late first-century Ephesian teacher Cerinthus, whose false teachings may have precipitated the writing of the gospel according to John.

### **Impact of the Colossian Heresy on Christianity in Nigeria**

Peter Jones discovered that the new age religion and Gnosticism, separated by some fifteen hundred years, nevertheless resemble one another, sometimes even to the smallest detail.<sup>43</sup> Nigeria is a multi-religious nation with Christianity as one of the major religions. Nigeria today seem to have taken a new turn in the practice of Christianity that is quite different from the Christianity of the early church as found in the New Testament. This form of Christianity can be said to be a similitude of the church in Colossae which Apostle Paul writes his epistle to address. The church must wake up from its dreams of glory to confront the reality of a new Gnostic invasion. Some of these teachings that contradict the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of the early church are expressed below:

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<sup>39</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1994), 60.

<sup>40</sup> Kurt Rudolph, "Gnosticism" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 David Noel Freedman ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1035

<sup>41</sup> Rudolf, 1035

<sup>42</sup> John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986), 21.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back: An Old Heresy for the New Age* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1992), 44.

### Prosperity Gospel

“The term Prosperity Gospel is synonymous to Prosperity theology, health and wealth Gospel, name it and claim it Gospel. It is a teaching that is based on the belief that an abundant life in Christ is devoid of suffering.”<sup>44</sup> Abraham Ajiboye sees prosperity gospel as a fundamental bane of Christianity in this contemporary period in Africa, and most especially in Nigeria.<sup>45</sup> Steve Philips buttresses that prosperity consciousness is a choking thorn which overtakes and cancels the progress of the word of God in a man.<sup>46</sup> Femi Adeleye further asserts that emphasis on prosperity rather than on the message of the cross is the gospel of champagne and, hence, false.<sup>47</sup>

The reality of the prosperity gospel is prevalent in Nigeria especially in the *African Indigenous churches*. The words of Bishop David Oyedepo, founder and pastor of *Living Faith Church World Wide* echo this reality in no uncertain terms: “When Jesus came, he knew his commission and declared it very clearly. I say this over and over again, God sent me. He said, ‘Go and make my people rich.’ That is an assurance that wherever I stand poverty must not survive...” He further states that, no one under his ministry is permitted to be poor, nor programmed for affliction. He said that God told him to go and stop the tears of mankind. He heard God clearly sending him for the financial rescue of mankind.”<sup>48</sup>

### Positive Confession

This is confessing your life into the very pattern that you want it to be regardless of the will of God. Positive confession goes with the slogans such as “name it and claim it, have faith in your faith.”<sup>49</sup> Femi Adeleye posits that to view positive confession as faith is nothing but a misconceived, manipulative, misplaced and misunderstood perception about faith.<sup>50</sup>

### Deification

This is a concept that emerged from Emperor worship; where the Emperors are seen as God and worshipped. This very concept is seen in the church. Ola Olumba is placed on the same pedestal with Jesus Christ and is seen by his followers as the promised Holy Spirit.<sup>51</sup> “A subtle change took place; many churches almost ceased to be congregations to worship God and became audiences gathered to watch men, believers who used to be participants in sacred liturgy became spectators at a religious performance. This is what A. W. Tozer calls the Great God entertainment.”<sup>52</sup>

### Syncretism

The trend of Christianity in Nigeria seems to portray a syncretistic kind of Christianity; a form of Christianity that seems to be fused with the philosophy that Paul warned the Colossian church to be careful of. There seems to be a fusion of the epicurean thought into modern day

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<sup>44</sup> Abraham A. Ajiboye, *Christian Suffering and Prosperity Gospel: A Study from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:18-25* (Kaduna: Able Publishers, 2013), 13.

<sup>45</sup> Ajiboye, vii.

<sup>46</sup> Steve Philips, *Positive Confession: Counterfeit Christianity* (Ibadan: DAC PRINTS, 2001), 39.

<sup>47</sup> Femi Bitrus Adeleye, *Preachers of a different Gospel: A Pilgrim's Reflections on Contemporary Trends in Christianity* (Bukuru: ACTS, 2011), 19.

<sup>48</sup> David Oyedepo, *Breaking financial Hardship* (Lagos: Dominion Publishing House, 1995). Cited by Femi Bitrus Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel* (Bukuru: ACTS, 2011), 20.

<sup>49</sup> Ajiboye, 17

<sup>50</sup> Adeleye, 66-72

<sup>51</sup> Friday M. Mbon, *Brotherhood of the Cross and Star* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 1992), 65.

<sup>52</sup> Adeleye, 19

Nigerian Christianity which rejects suffering as satanic and as a reality that occurs outside God's covering.

According to Abraham Ajiboye, the "prosperity Gospel teaches that material prosperity and perfect health are God's will for every Christian in this life and that there are divine keys or principles which when followed unlock and launch one into the realm of abundance and total well-being."<sup>53</sup> There also appears a Gnostic idea in Nigerian Christianity where suffering of whatsoever sort not minding its purpose is evil. This understanding fails to show that suffering is a biblical concept associated with Christianity.

### **Cross-less Gospel**

The pagan system, in both its ancient and modern forms, represents the very antithesis of true Christianity. Understanding the lie is of utmost importance for comprehending the truth.<sup>54</sup> Understanding the move of the new age prophets is a requirement for every Christian who desires to serve Christ in our time. In the cross-less gospel, emphasis is placed on the 'Champaign Gospel' rather on the real gospel. The Champaign gospel is the kind of gospel that advertises half-truths and calls for self-satisfaction. This gospel is strong enough to make its adherent unconscious of spiritual realities. It provides no room for the cross or the real Jesus of the cross. Instead, it has created a new Jesus who has come for comfort and not salvation.<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion**

One basic challenge that the Apostles, Apostolic fathers, and church fathers encountered and had to combat was the issue of heresy that was on rampage during their times. Paul's epistle to the church in Colossae was to change their preconceived mindset which was faulty. From all indications, Nigeria seems to be towing the path that the Colossians towed. To say Nigeria is the Colossae of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not out of place because there seems to be recurrences of events which the Apostle tried to combat in Colossae that are very much evident in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian Christianity. The Apostles' stern warning against falsehood that is seen in the Colossian church is of vital importance to the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century if heresy is to be refuted.

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<sup>53</sup> Ajiboye, 16

<sup>54</sup> Jones, 45

<sup>55</sup> Adeleye, 19-22

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