

**Lesson 8****Colossians 2:16-23**

To this point, Paul has issued two warnings: not to be deluded with "plausible arguments" (2:4) and not to be taken "captive by philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8), but he has not specified (probably intentionally) what the arguments were for or what the philosophy entailed. In this section, Paul fills in some details that constitute what is conventionally called the 'Colossian heresy'.

**Colossians 2:16-23**

- 16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on<sup>a</sup> you in questions of food<sup>b</sup> and drink<sup>c</sup>, or with regard to a festival<sup>d</sup> or a new moon or a Sabbath<sup>e</sup>.
- 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance<sup>f</sup> belongs to Christ<sup>g</sup>.
- 18 Let no one disqualify<sup>h</sup> you, insisting on asceticism<sup>i</sup> and worship of angels<sup>j</sup>, going on in detail about<sup>k</sup> visions<sup>l</sup>, puffed up without reason by his sensuous<sup>m</sup> mind<sup>n</sup>,
- 19 and not holding fast to<sup>o</sup> the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from<sup>p</sup> God<sup>q</sup>.
- 20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits<sup>r</sup> of the world, why, as if you were still alive<sup>s</sup> in the world, do you submit to regulations—
- 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste<sup>t</sup>, Do not touch"
- 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used<sup>u</sup>)—according to human precepts<sup>v</sup> and teachings<sup>w</sup>?
- 23 These have indeed an appearance<sup>x</sup> of wisdom<sup>y</sup> in promoting self-made religion<sup>z</sup> and asceticism<sup>A</sup> and severity to<sup>B</sup> the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence<sup>C</sup> of the flesh<sup>D</sup>.

- Notes**
- a NJB "criticize"; NRSV "condemn"; REB "take you to task"
- b KJV, ASV "meat"
- c NJB, REB, CDB sim., NIV "what you eat or drink"
- d KJV "holyday"; ASV "feast day"; NJB "'annual festivals"; NIV "religious festival"
- e KJV "the sabbath days"; ASV "a sabbath day"; NRSV "sabbaths"; NAB "sabbath"
- f KJV, ASV, CEB "body"; NJB, REB, NAB, NIV "reality"
- g HCSB "Messiah"
- h KJV "beguile"; ASV, CEB "rob you of your prize"; NJB, NASU sim. "not cheated of your prize"
- i KJV, ASV "voluntary humility"; NRSV, NASU, NAB "self-abasement"; REB "self-mortification"
- j NJB "by anyone who chooses to grovel to angels and worship them"
- k NJB, NAB sim. "pinning every hope on"; NRSV "dwelling on"
- l KJV "things which he hath not seen"; ASV, NIV sim. "things he hath seen"; HCSB, REB sim. "claiming access to a visionary realm"
- m KJV, ASV, NAB "fleshly"; NIV "unspiritual"
- n NJB, NRSV "by a human way of thinking"; CEB "selfish way of thinking"
- o NIV, CEB sim. "lost connection with"
- p NJB "given by"
- q KJV, ASV "increaseth with increase of God"; REB "grows according to God's design"
- r KJV, ASV "rudiments"; NJB "principles; NASU "elementary principles"; HCSB, NAB sim. "elemental forces"; NIV "elemental spiritual forces"
- s NJB, REB, NASU, NAB, CEB, NIV "living"
- t NJB "eat that"
- u KJV, ASV "with the using"
- v KJV, NJB, NASU, HCSB sim., NIV sim. "commandments"; REB "rules"

- w KJV, ASV, NUB, HCSB "doctrines"; REB "regulations"
- x REB "air"; HCSB "reputation"; NAB "semblance"
- y NJB "what seems to be good sense"
- z KJV, ASV "will worship"; NRSV "self-imposed piety"; REB "forced piety"; NAB "rigor of devotion"; NIV "self-imposed worship"
- A KJV, ASV, NJB, HCSB "humility"; NASU, NAB "self-abasement"; NIV "false humility"
- B KJV "neglecting of"
- C NAB "gratification"
- D NRSV "self-indulgence"; REB "sensuality"; CEB "selfish immoral behavior"

### Comments / Questions

1. Paul gives two "Let no one ..." warnings; the first that no one "pass judgement" on them (v.16), and the second that no one "disqualify" them (v.18; especially since it was the Father who "qualified" them, 1:12).
  - a. Within each warning, Paul lists the components of the teaching that were confronting the Colossians:
    - 1) v.16 Questions regarding food, drink, festivals, a new moon or a Sabbath,
    - 2) v.18 Insistence on asceticism, the worship of angels, and visions.
  - b. How do Paul's responses show the shortcomings of these teachings?
    - 1) v.17
    - 2) v.19
2. It is commonplace for us to understand the OT provisions as a "shadow" of Christ; we see this as part of the typology of Scripture. But this idea is only used by Paul here and twice by the writer of Hebrews (8:5; 10:1). Paul may have borrowed this metaphor from Greek thought (think Plato and his *Allegory of a Cave*).
  - a. What is the implication of the Jewish-like practices being a 'shadow' and Christ being the 'substance'?
  - b. Compare this idea to the statement in Matthew 5:17 where Jesus said concerning the Law and the Prophets that he came "not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Different way of saying the same thing?
3. The ESV translation "insisting on asceticism" (v.18) reflects one view (which may be better represented by the REB: "by the decision of people who go in for self-mortification"). Other (most?) translations go in the direction of the NRSV "insisting on self-abasement."
4. Paul's reference to the "worship of angels" has generated multiple questions to which a wide range of answers have been proposed. The expression could mean:
  - 1) worship given to angels, or
  - 2) the worship given by angels.

In the first instance, these opponents would be encouraging something that is not proper; going beyond the high regard Jews had for angels as mediators of the Law (Gal 3:19). In the second case, the opponents are perhaps claiming the special privilege of seeing angels in their visions worshipping God.

5. By placing the words "*Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch*" in quotes (which are generally seen as food regulations), the ESV suggests these are the actual watchwords used by the false teachers in Colossae. Have some of the Colossians fallen for such talk?
  
6. In reviewing this section, how would you answer the questions:
  - 1) What does not promote real spiritual growth?
  
  - 2) Where does real growth originate?
  
  - 3) What should be the implication of 'dying with Christ'?

### ***The Colossian Heresy\****

Paul, in verses 16-23 of chapter 2, lists some particular teachings he wants the saints at Colossae to avoid, and to understand that those who teach such things do not have superior insights. While these false teachings were to some extent based on Judaism, they were not pure Judaism (i.e., based on the OT or even the teachings of the Pharisees). They had been mingled with "philosophy", "human traditions", and "elemental spirits of the world" (2:8, 20, 22).

Because those who espouse these teachings are "puffed up" (2:18), claim to be wise (2:23), and promoted asceticism (2:18, 21, 23), many have seen connections to Gnosticism that flourished later in Asia Minor and elsewhere, and which presented a strong challenge to Christians in the second and third centuries. This would also explain why Paul focuses much of attention on the person of Christ since gnostic views would demand that Christ was something less than God.

It would be helpful if we could identify the source of the teaching. In other words, is there an answer to this question: *Did any religious group in Asia Minor during the first century hold views regarding food & drink, festivals, new moons, the Sabbath, as well as, teachings that promoted asceticism, the worship of angels, and visions?*

Many proposals have been made, but no census has been formed. That alone suggests that the only realistic answer to the question is: *We do not know*. That being said, we do know that Asia Minor was home to a wide variety of religious views and practices. Various Jewish groups, in particular, are known to have absorbed teachings and practices from a diversity of their Greek neighbors.

Whatever the case, Paul condemns all such speculation; Christ, who is the express image of God, is all sufficient and it is in him that the Colossians are able to enjoy the many benefits they do.

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*\* This is the conventional designation of the false teaching threatening the Colossian saints, but the word "heresy" may be misleading. Later in the second century and following, the term heresy was used to identify the well-defined teaching of influential Christians that deviated from the accepted (orthodox) teaching. In this case, we are not certain how well defined the false teaching in Colossians was and, it certainly seems, that those expounding it were not Christians nor was it derived from Christian beliefs.*