

CHAPTER 5

COLOSSIANS—FALSE TEACHING AND ITS ANTIDOTE

False Teaching and its Antidote (2:8 - 3:4)

Having extolled the Lord Jesus in the first major part of this letter, and having defended his own ministry and interest in the Colossians in the second major part, Paul now directly deals with the heretical doctrines and tendencies that are endangering the Colossian church. Basically, these tendencies undervalue the Lord Jesus, and seek other ways of reaching to God.

1. *The All-sufficiency of Christ (2:8-15)*

This section gets to the heart of the Colossian heresy. Bruce has a good introductory discussion in the NIC commentary (pp. 94-97). It appears that the Colossians were not being led into the Judaizer heresy as such, but rather into a Jewish mysticism, perhaps to be identified with the *merkabah* mysticism (see notes on introduction). By observance of the law, physical austerity, and the intermediary work of angels, the pious and enlightened Christian could attain a vision of God and become one of the spiritual elite. It is only by a proper understanding of Christ's superiority to all these means, that the Christian is kept safe from such false goals.

a. **The fullness of Christ (2:8-10)**

This small section summarizes the entire argument of the epistle.

v. 8, Beware lest there be someone carrying you off

“There is,” indic. verb shows real danger (Mark 14:2, *me* + indic.; cf. Heb 3:12; Gal 1:7).

“Carrying off,” *sulaggon*, make a prey, carry off as booty.

Paul views the Colossian Christians as victims of the conspiracy of false teachers, who are preying on their innocence, ignorance, and misguided zeal.

Through the philosophy and vain deceit according to the tradition of men,

“The philosophy,” as given by particular people, the *tis*, “someone.”

“Vain, empty deceit,” it leads nowhere.

“According to,” false standard set up for Christians.

“Tradition of men,” as opposed to the apostolic tradition of vv. 6-7.

According to the elements of the world and not according to Christ:

“Elements,” *stoicheia*, one of the controversial words in Colossians; see discussion in B. 98-100; O’B 129-32; can mean rudiments elementary teaching, as letters of alphabet (cf. Gal 4:3), syllables of words, natural elements (2 Pet 3:10), basic regulations and laws, or angelic powers; here it seems to refer to personified powers of the universe, the angelic intermediaries supposed to exist between God and man.

Pauline usage: Col 2:8, 20; Gal 4:3, 9.

“Not according to Christ,” he is the true source of teaching and belief.

v. 9, Because in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

“Because,” beware of these false doctrines, because they will lead one away from Christ.

“Fullness of the Godhead,” *theotes*, deity (essence); cf. *theiotes*, divinity (characteristics; Rom 1:20, *hapax*).

“Bodily,” emphasis on corporeal nature; cf. 1:22.

Harkens back to Col 1:19.

v. 10, And you are completed in him.

“Completed,” fulfilled; cf. v. 9; John 1:16; Eph 3:19; 4:13.

The Colossians need no further mysteries than the mystery of Christ.

Who is the head of every ruler and authority.

Christ is not only the head of the universe (1:15) and the head of the church (1:18), but he is also the head of all spiritual powers (2:10); all spirits are subject to him.

b. The new circumcision (2:11-12)

One of the tenants of this heresy was the necessity of keeping Jewish regulations, particularly circumcision. This requirement ties the heresy in particularly with Judaism. Paul

reminds them that circumcision's primary significance, as that of baptism which replaces it, is spiritual, and that they have already in Christ a circumcision of the heart which brings them the new life.

v. 11, in whom also you have been circumcised with a circumcision made without hands

Paul looks at the time of their baptism into Christianity (v. 12) as the time of their spiritual rebirth, which was the circumcision of the heart.

“In whom,” in Christ, their spiritual circumcision accomplished when Christ saved them by his Spirit

Spiritual circumcision:

In OT—Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4 (cf. “wash” in v. 14).

In NT—Rom 2:28-29; Phil 3:3.

“Made without hands,” cf. works of God:

Dan 2:34 (stone cut out; Messiah & kingdom).

Mark 4:58 (temple built; Christ's body).

2 Cor 5:1 (house made; resurrection body).

Heb 9:11 (heavenly tabernacle).

In this case, circumcision the work of God, not made by human means or strength.

In the removal of the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

“In the removal,” (B. “stripping off”; cf. v. 15; B. p. 104, n. 66) at baptism the Christian pledges the death of his old self; he no longer serves his own flesh, but his Lord.

“Circumcision of Christ,” could be objective genitive, the crucifixion of Christ which he underwent (O'B. 116-18; cf. Meredith Kline in *By Oath Consigned*); or it could be subjective genitive, the circumcision he performs in the heart of the believer (B. 104); the latter seems more natural in the context.

v. 12, Having been buried with him in baptism,

“Having been buried,” modal participle, explains how the Christian was circumcised.

“Baptism,” probably refers to initial water baptism.

UBS 3rd ed. {C} rating for masculine *baptismo*, over neuter *baptismati*; more of an emphasis on ceremonial washing, with OT purification links (cf. Mark 7:4, 8; Heb 6:2; 9:10).

The idea of burial in baptism was developed by Paul in Rom 6:4, where other figures are used: death, planted/united, crucified; baptism signifies death as well as life.

In whom also you were raised together through the faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead:

“In whom,” Christ; or perhaps “in which,” baptism.

“Raised together,” with Christ in his resurrection (cf. Eph 2:6).

“Through faith,” our faith in Christ; same power that raised Christ gives us new life (Rom 8:10-11).

Thus faith is the means by which the Christian receives new life to please God; it is not through human means. In this regard the answer to the Colossian heresy is similar to that of the Galatians.

c. The triumph of Christ (2:13-15)

Not only is Christ shown to be all-sufficient by his over-all superiority as head of all and by his unique role in giving us spiritual circumcision, but even more so, he is shown to be powerful even over those forces which the Colossians so admired, the heavenly powers. He triumphed over them in his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Some have maintained that vv. 13-15 are Paul’s rewording of a traditional baptism liturgical formula (O’B. 103-04).

v. 13, And you being dead in the transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh,

“And you,” brings attention once again to Colossians.

“Being dead,” spiritual death (cf. Eph 2).

“Transgressions & uncircumcision,” lost, hopeless estate of Gentiles without God or the covenants; also shows that majority of the church was Gentiles.

He has made you alive together with him,

Subject changed to 3rd sing, “God.”

“Make alive together,” as in v. 12; Eph 2:5.

“You,” resumptive from the beginning of the verse; textual variant, UBS {B}, over “us” or over omitting altogether.

Having forgiven us all the transgressions,

“Forgiven us,” both Jew and Gentile alike forgiven by God’s grace (*charisamenos*).

v. 14, Having blotted out the handwriting against us because of the ordinances which were opposed to us,

Sins “blotted out,” cf. Ps 32:1; Rom 4:7.

For difficult syntax, see B. 106, n. 80; he suggests “dative of accompaniment”: “the bond which stood against us, ordinances and all, the bond that was opposed to us”; O’B. 102: “the IOU which, because of the regulations, was against us and stood opposed to us.”

“Handwriting,” common in papyri, handwritten document binding its author; seems to be our obligation to keep the law, which we have failed to do; thus it condemns us (B. prefers to O’B idea of an IOU; p. 109, n. 91).

“Ordinances,” *dogmasin*, Jewish regulations which the heretics would seek to reinstate; for Gentiles, the laws of conscience would apply too; cf. Eph 2:15.

And has taken it out of the midst, nailing it to his cross:

“Out of the midst,” cf. 2 Thess 2:7.

Not only has Jesus blotted out these records of our disobedience, but he has nailed them to his cross, showing that he has entirely paid for our disobedience; these laws have been perfectly satisfied.

The custom of nailing one’s offenses to the cross (as the title over Jesus’ head) is reflected in this passage.

v. 15, Having disarmed the rulers and the authorities

“Disarm,” *apekduomai*, remove their armor, complete stripping; here, v. 11 (noun); 3:9; show himself to be head over all spiritual forces (v. 10).

“Rulers and authorities,” as in v. 10; these are the one the Colossians are seeking to investigate.

Kent and others maintain that these are good angels, who are led in triumph *with* Christ, as Paul in 2 Cor 2:14 (only other NT usage of “triumph”); that these were mediators of the OT law, and now are disenfranchised by Calvary, bringing the

dispensation of law to an end. However, context seems to favor more hostile heavenly powers to be involved.

Having made display (of them) boldly, having triumphed over them in it

“Make display,” in triumphal procession.

“Boldly,” “in boldness,” no fear or reserve.

“Triumphing,” here & 2 Cor 2:14; lead in triumphal procession; similar meaning to previous pt.

“In it,” in the cross.

In Christ’s crucifixion, although he appeared weak, he revealed his strength by destroying the force of our condemnation and by obtaining his reward as our Messiah, the sovereignty over all the promised kingdom, and over the universe itself. All spirits are now subject to him. This was anticipated in his exorcisms during his earthly ministry, but now is made certain.

2. Guard your freedom! (2:16—19)

Having shown that Christ is all-sufficient in his position and in his work, Paul proceeds to warn the Colossians to trust wholly in him and not to be led astray by the false teachers. They must not be enslaved by rules regarding ascetic practices, Jewish regulation, and angel worship.

a. Freedom in respect of food and festivals (2:16-17)

Paul now gets to the immediate problem, the particular requirements these teachers are placing on the Colossians.

v. 16, Therefore do not let anyone judge you in food and in drink

Freedom was allowed in these areas, especially in Gentile churches (Rom 14:3); the restrictions of the Jerusalem Council are not in view here. Jesus had cleansed all foods (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:9-16; 1 Cor 10:25-26).

The restrictions on drink point to more stringent laws, related to ascetic practices seeking special spiritual insight or blessings.

Or in a matter of a feast or of a new moon or of a Sabbath,

“In a matter of,” 2 Cor 3:10; 9:3.

The restrictions also involved a sacred calendar. An idiom of “an exhaustive enumeration of the sacred times according to the Jews” (Lightfoot).

These are to be matters of liberty (Rom 14:5-6). These rules imposed from the OT or another source are a step backward (Gal 4:9-10). Bruce mentions how the early church controversies over the dates of the festivals showed a disregard for Paul’s injunction (p. 115).

The Sabbath appears to be the Jewish weekly Sabbath, which now has been replaced by the Christian Lord’s Day. Many Jewish Christians continued to celebrate both days.

v. 17, Which things are a shadow of the things to come, but the body (is) of Christ.

“Of Christ,” genitive of possession.

The OT ordinances foreshadowed Christ in his various offices; they were a shadow (cf. Heb 8:5; 10:1). But the body that casts the shadow is Christ himself; since we have him, we should not seek the shadow.

b. Freedom in respect of asceticism and angel worship (2:18-19)

Not only were the Colossians to guard their freedom in the areas of Jewish regulations of food laws and the calendar, but also in any other area which was not required by the apostolic tradition.

v. 18, Let no one rule against you taking delight in humility and the worship of angels.

“Rule against,” athletic term; disqualify; their rules would make the Colossians fail in the real race.

“Taking delight,” permissible translation of *thelo en*; cf. LXX of 1 Sam 18:22; (Heb. *chaphats b*).

“Humility,” *tapeinophrosune*; self-conscious humility; cf. Phil 2:3.

“Worship of angels,” angelolatry; appeal to intermediaries (cf. R. C. Church). If objective genitive, they worship angels; if subjective genitive, they investigate how angels worship God. Subjective seems to work best for historical situation; see introduction. For the particular Colossian milieu, see B. 118-22.

Entering into which things he has seen, in vain being puffed up by the mind of his flesh,

“Entering into,” *embateuon*, rare word; NIV “Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen.”

“In vain being puffed up,” proud of visions, which mean nothing in spiritual understanding or conduct.

“In the mind of his flesh,” adjective use of genitive, “his fleshly mind”; he actually is captured by the flesh, while claiming to be liberated in spiritual visions.

v. 19, And not holding the head,

“Holding,” hold fast, Matt 7:8.

While he boasts about visions and his connection to spirits, he does not have an interest in Christ, who is the head of all spirits (v. 10).

from whom all the body through the ligaments and bonds being supported and being united grows the growth of God.

Christ as head of the church (1:18) supports the body, which in turn must receive its strength and cohesion from him. The “ligaments and bonds” (B. takes as idiom, “joints and ligaments”) are a metaphor.

“Grows the growth,” cognate accusative, Hebraism.

“Of God,” genitive of source, the growth God gives.

The Colossians are instructed to maintain their freedom in Christ. Only in him can they keep their faith united with the church. He will supply them with all the growth they need, and will unite them to God and to the universal church.

3. *You died with Christ; therefore . . . (2:20-23)*

Having exposed the false teachings of the heretics by showing their inadequacy and the contrasting all-sufficiency of Christ, Paul now offers the antidote. The Christian way of life provides the escape from bondage to sin and the ability to serve God acceptably. The antidote comes in two parts: (1) “Since you died with Christ” in 2:20, and (2) “Since you have been raised with Christ” in 3:1. This first part summarizes the freedom the Christian has from the external laws of men.

v. 20, Since you have died with Christ from the elements of the world,

First class conditional sentence, either true or untrue; Paul here assumes it is true.

“Died with Christ,” reference to conversion, outwardly marked by baptism and admittance to the church (Rom 6:1-10).

“From the elements of the world,” see under 2:8; in the present context, probably the elementary principles that the world takes for granted—that deprivation of the flesh somehow brings one closer to God.

Why as living in the world are you subjecting yourselves to ordinances—

“As living in the world,” hypothetical situation; “as though living in the world,” i.e., as subject to its laws.

“Subjecting yourselves,” here taken as a middle, could be passive, “why are you being subjected”; present tense shows present danger.

“Ordinances”; cf. the noun in v. 14.

v. 21, “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”—

These epitomize the moral approach of the Colossian false teachers, merely external prohibitions of acts not in themselves sinful. This asceticism is one of the elements of the Colossian heresy.

Some progression from more serious to less serious: handle, taste, touch.

v. 22, Which things which things are all unto destruction with their consumption,

The meats and drinks forbidden; all perish when eaten or drunk; cf. Mark 7:1-23; they can have no lasting moral qualities.

“According to the commandments and teachings of men?”

Concludes the question asked in v. 20, “why are you subjecting yourselves . . . ?” The particular antecedent is in the verb “subjecting yourselves.”

Human tradition of no authority for the Christian, cf. Isa 29:13 (esp. in LXX), quoted by Jesus in Mark 7.

v. 23, Such regulations (Gk. “which sort of things”) indeed are having a reputation of wisdom

“Which sort of things,” these and similar regulations (cf. Gal 4:24; 5:19; Phil 4:3).

B. notes that the Pythagoreans were one school which was venerated for ascetic practices.

In self-imposed piety and humility and harsh treatment of the body,

Ethelothreskia (*hapax*) “self-devised worship,” not founded on revelation

“Humility,” as in v. 18, a false humility.

“Harsh treatment of the body,” by ascetic practices; “body” contrasted with following term “flesh,” which has connotation of evil desires.

(But are) not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh.

The *de* after the *men* at the beginning of the verse can be assumed here.

“Against,” *pros*, can mean toward, with a positive interpretation of “indulgence” as “satisfying,” but the suggested translation seems most natural in context, recognizing the contrast between “body” and “flesh” when applied to sinful men; such actions and attitudes actually feed the sinful flesh.

4. You were raised with Christ; therefore . . . (3:1-4)

The Colossians’ resurrection with Christ points them to a different kind of life, a life based on spiritual union with Christ, not on undue attention to worldly ordinances.

v. 1, Therefore, since you have been raised up together with Christ,

First class condition, parallel to 2:20; points to baptism.

Be seeking the things above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God;

“Be seeking,” active interest in spiritual truth, the apostolic tradition about Christ and the Christian life.

“Where Christ is sitting,” note importance of ascension in early Christian preaching (B. 132, n. 3).

From Ps 110:1; cf. Eph 2:4-6; Rev 3:21.

v. 2, Be thinking about the things above, not the things upon the earth;

The Christian needs to be obeying the commands of Christ, given through the Holy Spirit through the Word of God and the apostles, not to the commands of men on the earth who do not have the Spirit of Christ.

“Be thinking,” continual seeking (as in v. 1).

v. 3, For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

“You have died,” aorist, at conversion, symbolized at baptism.

“Life is hidden,” not understood by world, which admires worldly philosophies; pf. tense, it remains there.

God and Christ have an interest in us, unlike the world, and therefore we should have our interest in them.

v. 4, When Christ, your life, shall appear.

The Christian is not to find glory in this life, being admired by worldly philosophers; the Christian’s life is hidden in Christ (v. 3), and will not be openly glorified until the coming of Christ (*phanerothe*).

“When,” *hotan*, doubt as to time, not as to certainty of occurrence.

“Your life,” textual variant, UBS {B}; other MSS, “our life”; here UBS goes against both B and Byz; Christ the life, John 14:6.

Then you also with him will appear in glory.

Promise of vindication and glorification at the parousia; John 17:22; Rom 8:17, 29-30; cf. Col 1:27.

This section marks the end of the more doctrinal part of Colossians. Paul has provided the doctrinal base underlying their responsibility to turn from the false teachers and to live Christian lives of service to God and love to their fellow Christians. The book now turns to this major topic.