



Colossians - Chapter Two

IV. Colossians 1:24-2:5 - Paul's Interest in the Colossians (continues/concludes)

IV.b Colossians 1:29-2:5 - Paul's labour for the Colossians (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Two

Paul concludes this section on a more personal note. He not only serves the church of Christ but struggles, in cooperation with God, for the congregations at Colossæ and Laodicea. Paul's intention is exactly the same as before; that is, to clarify that the purpose of his ministry is to make known to every Gentile, including those at Colossæ, the mystery of God, namely Christ. He does elaborate on the spiritual purpose of his ministry for them, that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love; and that they may have complete understanding and know the mystery of God.

Paul's response to false teaching typically contains two parts. First, he identifies the theological errors present in a particular congregation and draws out their negative implications for faith and life. For Paul, the problem with bad ideas is that they result in distorted notions of Christ and what it means to follow him. Second, he argues against these errors in light of the foundational convictions of his Gospel ministry, usually introduced at the outset of a letter. This, then, is the fabric of Paul's letter-writing: to clarify a problem along with its spiritual and moral consequences and to articulate the proper response to it in the light of the readers' own understanding of the word of truth.

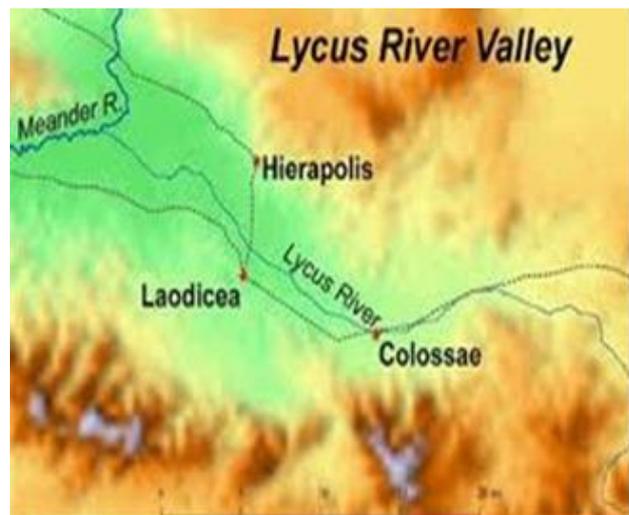
The problem Paul addresses in vv.16-23 is the legalistic submission to such regulations, such that observing them can even replace a congregation's devotion to Christ. What results is often called self-righteousness; that is, a believer's devotion is measured by how drab and dreary their Christianity is! What finally defines the borders of true Christianity is 'being in Christ', where God's grace transforms people into an alternative faith community. Any definition of Christianity that substitutes regulations of self-denial for self-transformation by the grace of God is spiritually impoverished and ultimately of no use to anyone.

¹ For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face.

Colossians 2:1

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you. Paul was under house arrest in Rome for his proclamation of the Gospel and therefore deprived of his personal liberty. In addition, he felt the emotional pressure of not being able to minister to the various church groups he was associated with: *<<And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches>>* (2 Corinthians 11:28).

For those in Laodicea. Laodicea was the last of seven churches to receive a letter in Christ's revelation to John and was the only one in which Jesus found nothing to commend; refer to Revelation 3:14-22. It was the nearest city to Colossæ, only 9 miles or 15km away. There was a close relationship between these churches as well as with the church at Hierapolis: *<<For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis>>* (Colossians 4:13). See the image.



Damaged by an earthquake in AD60, self-sufficient Laodicea, a commercial centre and site of thriving medical and textile industries, declined imperial disaster relief. The city did not see itself as: *<<poor, blind, and naked>>* (Revelation 3:17), nor did the complacent church within it. Laodicea was famous for its worship of Zeus, who appears on some of the city's coinage. Today one can still view unexcavated remnants of the city wall, two theatres, a stadium from the time of Vespasian, circa AD79, and a 2nd Century bath and/or gymnasium with adjacent water tower. An aqueduct came from the south toward Laodicea, bringing water rich in minerals. There is evidence of a Jewish presence in Laodicea. Twenty pounds of gold was confiscated in the 1st Century BC from Jews who intended to send it as a temple tax to Jerusalem (Cicero, For Flaccus 28).

All who have not seen me face to face. There are no historic reports of Paul travelling to any of the cities in the Lycus Valley. Therefore, unless they had travelled to Ephesus during Paul's three year ministry there, or had encountered him in other places, many in the church in that region would only have heard of Paul but would never have met him.

² I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:2-3

I want their hearts to be encouraged. In Paul's Jewish psychology the heart symbolises human volition rather than human emotion; the hard decisions of an embattled life are made by the believer's heart, fortified and matured by the mystery of God. Paul's Gospel ministry strengthens the Colossians against false teaching so that they are able to make decisions that please God.

Paul, in common with other NT authors, always believed that each member of the church should be united in love, for it was a primary call from the Gospel's architect: *<<I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another>>* (John 13:34-35). The word translated united, Greek *sybibazo*, means literally to be 'knitted together' and refers to an action that naturally follows after, if not also from, a fortified heart.

The false teachers presumably claimed access to the mysteries of God's truth, but Paul insists that Christ is God's mystery, and all understanding is to be found in him: *<<Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith>>* (Romans 16:25-26).

In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Anticipating what he will soon say about false sources of knowledge in vv.4-23, Paul emphasises that Christ is the ultimate storehouse of divine wisdom and spiritual knowledge. His language parallels what the OT says about wisdom: *<<if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding; if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures – then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding>>* (Proverbs 2:3-6), and how it will be found in the Messiah: *<<The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord>>* (Isaiah 11:2), and: *<<The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land>>* (Jeremiah 23:5).

⁴ I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Colossians 2:4-5

I am saying this reminds his readers that the commentary that follows comes from one who has been commissioned by God (1:25-26), to teach and admonish them (1:28-2:1). His autobiographical statement implies that his instruction, rather than that of the false teachers, should form the theology of Colossian Christianity.

So that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. Paul warns the Colossians about the direct and dangerous threat in their midst. It is important to see that the threat comes from within the church and that what the teachers are saying sounds reasonable and even persuasive, perhaps using Christian clichés and slogans intended to deceive immature believers.

The validity of such judgements is measured by two criteria:

1. Whether the content of the teaching fits with what the apostles teach about Christ.
2. Whether the resulting behaviour fits with what the Spirit empowers believers to be and to do.

The reports Paul has received about the Colossian situation have apparently convinced him that what is being taught there fails on both counts.

I am with you in spirit. Because both the Colossians and Paul live in Christ and possess the Spirit of God, there is a sense in which Paul is, in fact, present with them: <<*For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgement in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord*>> (1 Corinthians 5:3-5), and: <<*As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you – in person, not in heart – we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:17).

This intriguing connection between Paul's bodily absence and spiritual presence, which reflects his apostolic self-understanding, also reflects his understanding of Christ, who while absent in body continues to be present with each believer through his Spirit.

To express the stability that Paul wants to see continue in the Colossian church, he employs two military metaphors - morale or good order: <<*but all things should be done decently and in order*>> (1 Corinthians 14:40), and firmness: <<*Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering*>> (1 Peter 5:9). The Colossians should be like troops drawn up in battle formation, standing firm like soldiers resisting the enemy. While Paul's tone throughout this section is harsh toward his opponents, it remains gentle toward his readers.

V. Colossians 2:6-23 - The Dangerous Teaching at Colossæ

Paul delivers a series of warnings about the teaching that is threatening the Colossian church. In doing so, he also provides important teaching on the Christians' new identity in Christ that will help them resist the arguments of the false teachers and live worthily of the Lord.

V.a Colossians 2:6-19 - Fullness of Life in Christ

Paul challenges the legitimacy of the theological convictions that underlie the competing understanding of Christian faith in Colossæ. The polemical and theological discussion is divided into two subsections, each presenting an argument against a principal ingredient of the false teaching. In vv.6-8, the apostle introduces the first problem that threatens the readers' faith. The second subsection of Paul's theological polemic begins in vv.16-19 with his clarification of a related theological error.

V.a.i Colossians 2:6-8 - Warning about a deceptive teaching

Even though the Colossians are doing well spiritually, they must be on their guard against false teaching.

⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6-7

You therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord. Paul calls the Colossians back to the foundational teaching passed on to them by Epaphras when they first became Christians. At the heart of this is the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord: <<*Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit*>> (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Continue to live your lives in him, stated in the imperative mood, asserts the behaviour that logically and necessarily must result from the theological conviction that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all things. The Greek word for live, *peripateo*, literally means 'to walk about'. According to Paul, a believer's trust in the received Gospel of God's grace through Christ results in a 'walk about' in him, reflected also by John: <<*And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning – you must walk in it*>> (2 John 6), and: <<*I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely, how you walk in the truth*>> (3 John 3); they become familiar with him and a part of him. To embrace the truth about God's Christ is to live in him.

Paul uses the images of a tree, i.e. rooted: <<*and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love*>> (Ephesians 3:17), and a building, that is, built up: <<*Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, 'We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who*

together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem’>> (Ruth 4:11), and: <<Meanwhile the church throughout Judæa, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers>> (Acts 9:31), to remind them of their firm foundation in what they have already been taught. The implication is why should they now give a hearing to any rival teaching?

Just as you were taught refers to the ministry of Epaphras as commented on in Colossians 1:7. His teaching was centred on the truth of the Gospel and the grace of God, for which the Colossians should naturally be abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive, Greek *sylagōgeō*, is commonly used of the plundering of cargo from a ship. The false teachers in Colossæ pose a very real threat to the church. The use of this particular Greek word is a play on words with synagogue, which leads some to believe that the false teaching came from the local Jewish community; although this is by no means certain, Paul’s continued examples that specifically relate to Judaism in the upcoming verses do support the idea that the teachers had a Jewish heritage. However, the type of Judaism that denies Jesus as the Jewish Messiah is as useless to people as was the paganism they had turned away from when coming to Christ. Paul warned Timothy to avoid this type of teaching in Ephesus: *<<Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge>>* (1 Timothy 6:20).

The Greek for philosophy includes the article *tēs philosophias*, suggesting that the ringleaders of the faction called their teaching ‘the philosophy’. When Paul speaks of ‘filling’ and ‘fullness’ in this letter (vv.9-10), he is clearly echoing the jargon of the erring teachers, and he may be doing the same here. The term philosophy was used much more broadly in the ancient world than it is today. Josephus, for instance, could call the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees philosophies. Even a magician could be called a philosopher. Paul is not making a blanket condemnation of the traditional Greek philosophical schools, e.g. Platonism, Stoicism, Aristotelianism, etc. His remarks are focused on the particular factional teaching being disseminated at Colossæ.

He makes the incisive claim that this teaching is not only empty deceit but that it has been inspired by the elemental spirits, Greek *stoicheia*, of the universe, something that captivates all who are not grounded in the Gospel: *<<So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world>>* (Galatians 4:3).

Stoicheia is sometimes translated ‘the basic principles’ of the world and then interpreted to be something like the fundamental principles of pagan religion or a natural rather than divine ordering of the world. In the ancient world,

however, the term *stoicheia* was widely used for spirits in Persian religious texts, magical papyri, astrological documents, and some Jewish texts. Paul is likely using it here to refer to demonic spirits; it is the equivalent of 'rulers and authorities' (v.10 and v.15).

Although the false teaching is handed down as human tradition, it can ultimately be traced to the influence of demonic forces. The fundamental problem with this philosophy is that it is not in accord with Jesus Christ and the Gospel proclaimed by him, Paul and the other apostles.

V.a.ii Colossians 2:9-19 - Help for the danger: resources in Christ

The Colossian church has everything they need in Jesus Christ. Since they are forgiven of their sins by virtue of the Cross of Christ and are already living a new life in him, they should not turn to anything or anyone else to complete their spiritual well-being; they are complete in Christ.

Apparently the false teachers advocated asceticism for spiritual growth. The true path to spiritual maturity is holding fast to Christ as the head, not following these misguided human rules and rituals.

⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

Colossians 2:9-10

In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. Christ is the visible expression of God. In his incarnation and now in his glorification, Jesus is God in the flesh, simultaneously and completely human and God at the same time, as confirmed in Colossians 1:15-20. Jesus is certainly not a demigod, half human and half divine; nor is he a human being with a divine spirit. By being both fully God and fully human, Jesus immediately upstages all pagan deities and divinities.

You have come to fullness in him. In this remarkable statement, Paul affirms that believers share in Christ's power and authority over every rule and authority by virtue of their union with him. Here is the main theme of Colossians. The divine fullness is in Christ: <<*From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace*>> (John 1:16), and believers are 'filled in him'. Hence, they have everything they need in Christ, being complete even if still a work in progress. They do not need any other teaching to become like God. In addition, it clearly indicates that, because Christ still lives, believers in him also live.

Paul also links the fullness of deity, that is, God, with the newness of life; thus, as believers become alive through faith in him, their humanity is made more complete. By the work of grace, every good intention of the Creator for the creature is realised in Christ. Paul's brief commentary on Christ's incarnation, although cast in the idiom of Colossian Christianity and without the critical awareness formed by the church's subsequent debate, nevertheless provides a biblical model to guide a believer's thinking about Christ's deity.

In his pre-Christian life as a Pharisee, Paul would have only accepted one God and therefore would never have acknowledged Jesus as being divine. However,

his Christology allowed him to recognise the Trinitarian godhead, one true God yet manifested in three distinct persons, yet of one essence. Paul never dwells too much on exploring the relationship between the three; his interest is more with their mutual relationship with the church.

The term head: <<*And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church*>> (Ephesians 1:22), is clearly used here with the sense of 'having authority over', as noted in comments on 1 Corinthians 11:3. It was given to Jesus by his Father: <<*And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'*>> (Matthew 28:18). This would have been an encouraging and helpful teaching for the Colossians, who clearly continued to live in fear of the demonic realm.

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ;

Colossians 2:11

In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision. Paul here uses circumcision metaphorically for a spiritual action, which he describes as putting off the body of the flesh, using a term that would be used for taking off one's clothing. Believers no longer live in the sphere of the flesh and its influence: <<*And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*>> (Galatians 5:24), but have been transferred into the Kingdom of Christ, now living through and in him, under his lordship: <<*He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son*>> (Colossians 1:13). In this circumcision performed by Christ, Christians have been removed from their solidarity with Adam and his sin: <<*We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin*>> (Romans 6:6), and are now in solidarity with Christ and his righteousness, and can live for him, something they could not do before.

¹² when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:12-14

You were buried with him in baptism, also raised with him in faith and made alive together with him. In a second metaphor drawn from Christ's work on the Cross, Paul says that the Christian rite of baptism represents an identification with Christ in his death: <<*Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that*>>

the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin>> (Romans 6:4-6), along with an identification with Christ in his resurrection: <<*and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*>> (Ephesians 2:6). Dying and rising with Christ signify death to the power of sin and Satan, plus empowerment to live the new life that Jesus calls believers to live in imitation of him; refer to Romans 6:3-11 and the associated comments.

Paul is no longer interested in circumcision as the removal of a small piece of human flesh from the body. Instead, he sees baptism as the mode of entry into the Christian community because it represents the shedding of a whole way of life. It means dying to the old world and coming alive in God's new one.

The power of God, who raised him from the dead. Paul indicates that it was by the power of God that Jesus was raised from death. This is not a contradiction with other scriptures but an affirmation of the Trinity working equally in power together. Jesus confirmed that he had the power to rise from death: <<*For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father*>> (John 10:17), and Paul confirms it was achieved by the Holy Spirit: <<*If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you*>> (Romans 8:11).

When you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh refers to the time before they came to believe in Jesus as the Christ. The references in v.11 and here to circumcision again lead many commentators to believe the false teachers were arguing that the local Christians had to observe Jewish rites and laws in order to be accepted as God's people.

The record that stood against us is primarily a reference to the Law of Moses, which prevented Gentiles from coming to God and condemned the Jews who broke the law, i.e. with its legal demands. In the Greco-Roman world, the 'record of debt', Greek *cheirographon*, was a written note of indebtedness. Paul uses this as a word picture to characterise each person's indebtedness to God because of sin. God himself has mercifully resolved this problem for all who put their faith in Jesus by taking this note and nauling it to the Cross, where Jesus paid the debt. The image comes from both Jesus' own body being nailed to the Cross and the notice fastened to a Cross by the Roman authorities, declaring the crime for which the criminal was being executed: <<*Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'* Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."' Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written'>> (John 19:19-22).

¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

Colossians 2:15

He disarmed the rulers and authorities. The Cross of Christ marks the decisive defeat of the demonic powers. On the Cross, they were stripped of their power to accuse Christians before God. Greek *diabolos* or devil also means accuser or slanderer. Nevertheless, these demons continue to exist and to exercise power to incite evil, so Christians must continue to combat their influence: <<***For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places***>> (Ephesians 6:12).

Made a public example of them. This is the same term, Greek *deigmatizō*, used in Matthew 1:19 to refer to Joseph's unwillingness to expose Mary's pregnancy and bring public shame on her: <<***Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly***>>. The Cross publicly reveals the failure of the demonic powers to thwart God's plan of salvation through Christ: <<***Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory***>> (1 Corinthians 2:6-8).

Triumphing over them. The image is of a triumphal Roman military procession. The defeated king with all of his surviving warriors and the spoils of war were paraded through the streets of Rome, as a public spectacle for all to see, followed by the public execution of the king and his other leaders. In the case of local executions, the Romans showed even more contempt for their victims by declaring they were not even worth taking back to Rome for such a triumphant display. By executing Jesus, publically stripped naked and terribly beaten, under the sign King of the Jews, was a statement of triumph for paganism over Judaism. Yet, quite remarkably, Paul sees it as the reverse. It was the rulers and authorities who were put to shame on the Cross, they were the ones being held up to public contempt, and it was Jesus that was triumphant! Paul never gets tired of relishing the glorious paradox of the Cross: God's folly overcoming human wisdom.

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.

Colossians 2:16

Do not let anyone condemn you. Because of what Jesus did on the Cross, those who accept him as their Lord and Saviour are free from all condemnation, as Paul declares elsewhere: <<***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death***>> (Romans 8:1-2).

Matters of food and drink, observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. The false teachers were advocating a number of Jewish observances, arguing that they were essential for spiritual advancement. These clearly relate to the rites and practices documented in the Jewish Law: <<***Speak to the people of Israel and***>>

say to them: These are the appointed festivals of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed festivals>> (Leviticus 23:2), <<And they shall stand every morning, thanking and praising the Lord, and likewise at evening, and whenever burnt-offerings are offered to the Lord on sabbaths, new moons, and appointed festivals, according to the number required of them, regularly before the Lord>> (1 Chronicles 23:30-31).

The first day of the month, indicated by the new moon, was an important festival, for as many sacrifices were offered then as at Passover or Pentecost. It was an occasion for family worship: *<<David said to Jonathan, ‘Tomorrow is the new moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king at the meal; but let me go, so that I may hide in the field until the third evening. If your father misses me at all, then say, “David earnestly asked leave of me to run to Bethlehem his city; for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family”>> (1 Samuel 20:5-6), and: <<He said, ‘Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath.’ She said, ‘It will be all right’>> (2 Kings 4:23).* It was like the Sabbath, a day when all trading was forbidden: *<<Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances>> (Amos 8:4-5).*

¹⁷ These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Colossians 2:17

A shadow of what is to come. The old covenant observances pointed to a future reality that was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ: *<<Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach>> (Hebrews 10:1).* Hence, Christians are no longer under the Mosaic covenant; refer also to Romans 6:14-15, Romans 7:1-6, 2 Corinthians 3:4-18 and Galatians 3:15-4:7. Christians are no longer obligated to observe OT dietary laws, i.e. food and drink, or festivals, holidays and special days, including new moons or sabbaths, for what these things foreshadowed has been fulfilled in Christ. It is debated whether the sabbaths in question included the regular seventh-day rest of the fourth commandment: *<<Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy>> (Exodus 20:8), and: <<Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day>> (Deuteronomy 5:15), or were only the special sabbaths of the Jewish festal calendar.*

The substance belongs to Christ. A good analogy is that the old covenant was but a shadow cast by Christ, for he is the only true reality in all of creation.

¹⁸ Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom

the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Colossians 2:18-19

Paul lists a variety of ways the false teachers had tried to disqualify the genuine believers in Colossæ. This is a typical Pauline allusion to the sporting arena, something popular in the Gentile world, as also seen in references such as: <<***Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it***>> (1 Corinthians 9:24), and: <<***I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus***>> (Philippians 3:14).

Self-abasement or asceticism translates the Greek word for humility, *tapeinophrosynē*. Paul probably had in mind fasting and perhaps also the taboos mentioned in v.21.

Worship of angels involves invoking angels for help and protection from evil spirits. John was admonished for his error when he understandably did so in the presence of an angel: <<***Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy'***>> (Revelation 19:10).

The verb translated dwelling on, Greek *embateuō*, is rare in Greek literature and difficult to interpret. The use of this word on a series of inscriptions found near Ephesus, however, has clarified its meaning here. It denoted the higher stage of mystery cult initiation that involved entering the innermost sanctuary of the pagan temple. The term suggests that the leader of the Colossian faction may be basing part of his teaching on spiritual experiences he gained in a pagan ritual initiation, thus showing the syncretistic nature of his false teaching. It seems some form of visionary experience and thus mystical insight was offered as part of the false teaching.

Not holding fast to the head. The fundamental problem with the competing teachers at Colossæ is that they have not maintained contact with Christ and have thus become influenced by evil spirits, see v.8. As the head of the body, Christ not only provides leadership but is also a source of provision for every member of the body, its ligaments and sinews, so that it grows and matures; refer to the comments made on 1 Corinthians 11:3. On the church as a body, refer to Romans 12:5-8, 1 Corinthians Chapter 12, Ephesians 4:4 and 4:12-16.

A growth that is from God. Paul confirms this to the Corinthians: <<***I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth***>> (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

V.b Colossians 2:20-23 - Warnings against False Teachers

As in v.8, Paul once again uses the difficult but important catchword *stoicheia*, translated 'elemental spirits', to call attention to his opponent's preoccupation with the four basic elements of earth, which make up the very things not handled,

not tasted, not touched. From the beginning of his letter, Paul has underscored the importance of relating the material world to the spiritual - the one should always bear witness to the other.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹ ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’?

Colossians 2:20-21

For comments on the elemental spirits of the universe refer to v.8.

Why do you submit to regulations is again a clear reference to the law but it can also be applied to any human rules that contradict the truth of the Gospel.

‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’. Quotation marks are used here to indicate that these are specific taboos, which the teacher of the false philosophy is insisting the Colossians must obey. These rules are not divine but human, for the food a person eats is not crucial in his or her spiritual life: <<*He said to them, ‘Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?’ (Thus he declared all foods clean)>> (Mark 7:18-19).*

²² All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

Colossians 2:22-23

All these regulations refer to things that perish with use is Paul’s way of saying that the Jewish Law was a pointer to the coming Messiah. Now that he had come there was no point in continuing in the old practices.

They are simply human commands and teachings. Although they had been instituted by God, they have been surpassed by the coming of Christ, and those who continue to teach they are the only way to God do so purely from a human perspective: <<*The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote>> (Isaiah 29:13), <<in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines>> (Matthew 15:9), <<For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths>> (2 Timothy 4:3-4), and: <<That testimony is true. For this reason rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of those who reject the truth>> (Titus 1:13-14).*

An appearance of wisdom. The ringleaders of the faction in Colossæ were advocating an esoteric wisdom for daily life that would allegedly help the Colossians deal with evil spirits and cope with life's circumstances.

Self-imposed piety. The Greek word *ethelothrēskia* could also be translated 'voluntary worship' or 'self-made religion', which may allude to the fact that the false teacher was stressing the Colossians' freedom to choose this syncretistic path contrary to apostolic tradition.

Severe treatment of the body refers to the fasting and taboos that were part of the ascetic behaviour advocated by the philosophy. It may have gone beyond this, however, to include forms of self-mutilation similar to what was practiced in some of the local cults, and was certainly evident in Baal worship: <<***Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them***>> (1 Kings 18:28). Such humility may appear to be spiritual, but it actually promotes nothing more than confidence in self rather than in Christ.

They are of no value in checking self-indulgence. All Christian believers should take heed of Paul's teaching here for it is all too easy for individuals to become focused on themselves or indeed for a church to look inwardly and not outwardly. All are called to the service of others and should serve in ministry for that purpose and not simply to fulfil their own desires.