

## WHAT WAS THE COLOSSIAN HERESY?

The first half of Paul's letter to the Colossians, especially the second chapter, is an effort to combat false teachings that were being promoted to the Church there. This epistle is generally dated to the period of 58-60 CE, and is commonly thought to have been written by Paul while he was imprisoned in Rome. In recent years, many scholars have concluded that the internal evidence within the epistle indicates an early form of Gnosticism was the culprit in Colosse.

In order to grasp some of the points Paul makes in his letter, a rudimentary understanding of the basic tenets of Gnosticism is required. Gnosticism wasn't a separate religion; rather, it was a philosophy that was blended with components of existing religions. Apparently, elements of Judaism/Christianity were combined with Gnostic beliefs soon after the Church began, creating the heretical teachings that Paul combats in his letter to the Colossians.

The term "Gnostic" comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means knowledge. Gnosticism was a complex religious philosophy which taught that salvation could only be achieved through secret knowledge. Although there were many different types of Gnosticism, they had several common features. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE) records the following general characteristics found within most varieties of Gnosticism:

The following may be regarded as the chief points in the Gnostic systems:

- (1) a claim on the part of the initiated to a special knowledge of the truth; a tendency to regard knowledge as superior to faith and as the special possession of the more enlightened, for ordinary Christians did not possess this secret and higher doctrine;
- (2) the essential separation of matter and spirit, matter being intrinsically evil and the source from which all evil has arisen;
- (3) an attempt to solve the problems of creation and the origin of evil by postulating a demiurge, i.e., a creator or artificer of the world distinct from the deity, and emanations extending between God and the visible universe (the demiurge for the Gnostics being the God of the OT, an inferior being infinitely remote from the Supreme Being who can have nothing to do with anything material);
- (4) a denial of the true humanity of Christ; a docetic Christology which considered the earthly life of Christ and especially His sufferings on the cross to be unreal;
- (5) the denial of the personality of the Supreme God, and also the denial of the free will of mankind;
- (6) the teaching, on the one hand, of asceticism as the means of attaining spiritual communion with God, and, on the other hand, of an indifference that led directly to licentiousness;
- (7) a syncretistic tendency that combined certain more or less misunderstood Christian doctrines and various elements from oriental, Jewish, Greek, and other sources;
- (8) ascription of the OT to the demiurge or inferior creator of the world.

Some of these ideas are more obvious in one and some of them in another of the Gnostic systems. (pp. 486-487, vol. 2, "Gnosticism")

As we will see when we examine the first two chapters of Paul's letter, the Colossian form of Gnosticism incorporated many of these beliefs. Paul alludes to several Gnostic doctrines and restrictions in his epistle, in addition to specifically listing some of their teachings at the end of chapter two.

We're going to look closely at these two chapters to identify the group Paul is combating. We'll go through each verse, pulling out the clues that Paul gives us. Let's start at the beginning of the letter:

COLOSSIANS 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (NKJV)

This is Paul's usual form of introduction in his letters. He identifies himself and his companion (Timothy), and then names the Church he is writing to (Colosse). Colosse was situated close to the River Lycus, about 15 miles southeast of Laodicea and a little over 100 miles east of Ephesus, in what is now Turkey.

COLOSSIANS 1:3 We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; 5 because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth; 7 as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, 8 who also declared to us your love in the Spirit. (NKJV)

Neither Paul nor Timothy had seen the Colossian church. But they had heard of their faith and love from Epaphras, who ministered to the Colossians. Indeed, it's very likely that Epaphras had carried the gospel to Colosse after hearing Paul preach it elsewhere (probably at Ephesus).

COLOSSIANS 1:9 For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge [epignosin] of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; 10 that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge [epignosin] of God; 11 strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; 12 giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. (NKJV)

In this passage, Paul begins his attack on the Gnostic beliefs being promulgated to the Colossians. He does so with a few subtle statements that are easily overlooked if the context isn't recognized. Paul states that he and Timothy have been praying for the Colossians, asking God to fill them with knowledge, that they may be fruitful in every good work. In verses 9 and 10, the word "knowledge" comes from the Greek word epignosin. Of this word, Kenneth S. Wuest writes:

The word is an advance upon gnosis (knowledge) in that it denotes a larger and more thorough knowledge. It is a knowledge which grasps and penetrates into an object. It was a favorite word of the Gnostics who used it to designate the superior knowledge which they claimed as their exclusive possession. Paul prays that all the saints might become possessors of this knowledge, indicating that it was open for all to appropriate, not a secret mystery into which only a favored few could be initiated. (p. 175, vol. I, Word Studies in the Greek New Testament, "Ephesians and Colossians")

Paul uses epignosis to emphasize the true and full knowledge of God that he wanted the Colossians to attain. The implication is that the knowledge of the Gnostics was neither true nor full.

COLOSSIANS 1:13 He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, 14 in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. (NKJV)

Paul continues his indirect discourse against Gnosticism in verses 13 and 14. The Gnostics denied that the Messiah had come in the flesh. They taught that one did not need the atoning sacrifice of his blood for salvation, because he had never really lived as a human being. Rather, the Gnostics emphasized that salvation could be attained only through the secret knowledge that Christ had given his disciples.

The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary (Eerdmans) states: "Increasingly, scholars recognize that Christianity's proclamation of a divine savior provided the catalyst for the Gnostic movement. Many Gnostics traced their teaching back to him and the secret teaching he purportedly revealed after the resurrection. Gnostic christologies offer a savior without the incarnation (a Christ-spirit) who gives knowledge instead of calling for faith . . ." (p. 422, "Gnosticism"). This is a theme we'll see Paul combat again later in his letter.

COLOSSIANS 1:15 Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: (KJV) 16 for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning [arche], the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. (RSV)

In verses 15 through 18, Paul contradicts the Gnostic view of creation and the structure of the Godhead. Regarding the Gnostic belief about the composition of the Godhead, Eerdmans says, "Between God and matter lie a host of spiritual powers, collectively termed the fullness (pleroma) of God. From its lowest rank comes the creator, a demiurge identified with the Old Testament Yahweh. Fallen spiritual powers, often linked with astral referents, now rule the world" (p. 421, "Gnosticism").

The Gnostics believed that angels were emanations from the Most High God. They were all imperfect, with the highest and most ancient of them being more ethereal and inviolate than those in the next level down, and so on through the ranks. To discredit this Gnostic teaching on the "fullness of the Godhead," Paul specifically states in verse 15 that Christ is the "firstborn of every creature," thereby establishing his preeminence in the order of creation. For additional information on this topic, see my article "The Lord Our God, The Lord Is One."

The Gnostics taught that the demiurge was the creator of the earth and of mankind. Yet in verse 16, Paul says that the entire creation, both material and spiritual, was accomplished by God through Christ. This would place Christ, the instrument of creation, second only to God the Father in the spiritual order. Obviously, this teaching contradicted the Gnostic view of the spiritual hierarchy.

In verse 18, Paul again emphasizes that Christ is the "beginning" (Gr. arche). This is the same word found in Revelation 3:14, where Christ states that he is "the beginning of God's creation." Once more Paul is highlighting the primacy of Christ's position in the order of created things.

COLOSSIANS 1:19 For it pleased the Father that in him all the fullness [pleroma] should dwell, 20 and by him to reconcile all things to Himself, by him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of his cross. 21 And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now he has reconciled 22 in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in his sight — 23 if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister [diakonos]. (NKJV)

In verse 19, Paul first introduces the term pleroma in his epistle. An understanding of the Gnostic view of the "fullness of the Godhead" will aid in ascertaining why Paul brings up this concept several times in his letter to the Colossians.

In the Jewish New Testament Commentary (JNTC), David H. Stern writes: "'Pleroma' was a technical term used by the Gnostics and their antecedents to refer to the totality of the various spiritual 'levels' and the beings or entities presumed to exist there . . ." (p. 605).

Of the "pleroma," ISBE states:

For the Gnostics God is the ultimate, nameless, unknowable being called the 'Abyss.' He is perfect, but the material world is alien to the divine nature. How, then, does it come to exist at all? What is the source of its imperfections and evils? The Gnostic answer is that the FULNESS (Gr. pleroma) of the diety could flow out in no other way than in emanations or aeons or angels, all of which are necessarily imperfect, the highest of them being more spiritual than the grade immediately below. Of these aeons there is a gradation so numerous that at length the lowest of them is almost wholly corporeal, the spiritual element having been gradually diminished or eliminated until at last the world of mankind and of matter is reached, the abode of evil. In this way the gulf is bridged between God and mankind. The highest aeons approximate closely the divine nature, so spiritual are they and so free from matter. These form the highest hierarchy of angels, and these with many other grades of angelic hosts are to be worshiped. (p. 488, vol. 2, "Gnosticism")

We see this Gnostic belief in the need to worship the angelic host specifically referred to later in the letter (Col. 2:18). Paul's argument for the primacy of Christ, which began in verse 15, rebuts the Gnostic teaching on the nature of the Godhead. It is not through the hierarchy of angels (aeons) that Christians are reconciled to God, but rather through His son, Yeshua the Messiah.

Paul states that this reconciliation is through the body of the Messiah's flesh. Again he is contrasting the false Gnostic beliefs about Christ not actually coming in the flesh with the truth of the gospel, which shows that the Messiah did live on earth as a human. Paul says that Christ's death on the cross will reconcile the Colossians to the Most High God, as long as they faithfully hold fast to the original gospel that was preached to them.

COLOSSIANS 1:24 I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of his body, which is the church, 25 of which I became a minister [diakonos] according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, 26 the mystery [musterion] which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. 27 To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery [musteriou] among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. 29 To this end I also labor, striving according to his working which works in me mightily. (NKJV)

Here, Paul mentions another aspect of the Gnostic teaching, that of the divine "mystery" (Gr. musterion). In the religious cults of the Graeco-Roman world, this word literally referred to a religious secret that was confided only to the initiated, a secret rite. By his use of musterion, Paul is emphasizing that the teaching the Colossians had received about Christ was the true revealing of the long-hidden mystery of God. Conversely, Paul implies that the mystery the Gnostics wished to reveal to them was false.

When Paul calls himself a "minister" (Gr. diakonos) in verses 23 and 25, most assume that to be an office within the hierarchy of the early church. However, in Greek diakonos really only means "one who renders service," or "a servant." This same word or a variation of it is translated in the NKJV as "servant" (Matt. 20:26; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 12:26), and "deacon" (Phi. 1:1; I Tim. 3:8, 10, 12, 13), as well as "minister" (Rom. 13:4; Gal. 2:17; Eph. 3:7; 6:21; Col. 1:7; 1:23; 1:25; 4:7; I Tim. 4:6). The different translations of this word from Greek into English come more from the traditional hierarchical view of church government than from the actual meaning of the word itself.

COLOSSIANS 2:1 For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge [epignosin] of the mystery [musteriou] of God, both of the Father and of Christ, 3 in whom are hidden [apokruphoi] all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge [gnoseos]. (NKJV)

The second chapter begins with Paul telling the Colossians that although he had not been to their city, he was aware that they were having problems and was concerned about them. Verse 2, which emphasizes knowledge (Gr. epignosin) and understanding, is another clue to the source of the problem the Colossians are experiencing. The Greek word apokruphoi, which is translated "hidden" in verse 3, literally means "a hidden thing, a secret." Paul here takes another subtle shot at the Gnostics, saying that all the "secret knowledge" the Colossians need is found in God the Father and the Messiah.

COLOSSIANS 2:4 Now this [touto de] I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. (NKJV)

The words "now this" (Gr. touto de) indicate that verse 4 is Paul's summation of everything he's written up to this point in his letter. According to Friberg's Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament (Friberg), the pronoun touto ("this") is "used to call attention to a designated person or object, often with special emphasis . . ." Friberg says that the conjunction de ("now") is used "most commonly to denote continuation and further thought development . . ." This shows that Paul's prior statements were written to set the stage for his attack on the false teachings being presented to the Christians in Colosse.

COLOSSIANS 2:5 For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. 6 As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. (NKJV)

In verse 5 Paul launches into the second part of his letter by praising the Colossians' faith, which was most likely reported to him by Epaphras. Evidently, the Gnostic teachers had not yet made any significant headway in the community of believers. Before Paul begins his rebuttal of the Gnostics, he exhorts the Colossians in verses 6 and 7 to remain faithful to the teachings initially brought to them.

COLOSSIANS 2:8 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 [ta stoicheia tou kosmou], and not according to Christ. (NRSV)

Paul gets to the heart of the problem in verse 8. He warns the Colossians of the devious philosophy the Gnostics were promoting and labels their doctrines the traditions of men (see Matt. 15:1-9; Mark 7:1-13), as well as the teaching of demons.

The Greek phrase ta stoicheia tou kosmou, translated as "the elemental spirits of the universe" above, has been interpreted in several ways. However, The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology states: "In the case of Gal. 4:3, 9 and Col. 2:8, 20 it is a disputed question whether or not the stoicheia tou kosmou, the "elements of the world", are angels, demons, gods, i.e., personified forces as taught by a certain gnostic heresy. Most commentators hold this to be the case . . ." (p. 452, vol. 2).

Of the Greek phrase stoicheia tou kosmou used by Paul, JNTC says, "Elemental spirits of the universe . . . both Jews and Gentiles, were slaves to them. Gentiles served these demonic spirits as gods. Jews, though knowing the one true God, were sometimes led astray by demonic spirits . . ." (p. 556). Clearly, this "philosophy" Paul refers to in verse 8 was contrary to Christ, being derived from human tradition and demonic influence.

COLOSSIANS 2:9 For in him the whole fullness [pleroma] of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness [pepleromenoi] in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. (NRSV)

In verse 9 Paul reemphasizes Christ's spiritual position by using the term pleroma again. In verse 10, he uses a related Greek word for "fullness" (pepleromenoi) to show the Colossians that they have no need

of anything other than Christ. In the last half of verse 10, Paul clearly states that Christ is above all spiritual rulers and powers (cf. Eph. 6:12). Therefore, there is no reason for the Colossians to worship angels (Col. 2:18) in order to reach God. As Paul later wrote in his first epistle to Timothy, "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 2:5).

COLOSSIANS 2:11 In him you were also [kai] circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 buried with him in baptism, in which you also [kai] were raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. (NKJV)

Theologians have long believed that Paul's mention here of circumcision is directly related to the heresy being promoted in Colosse. Yet an objective look at the context of this statement does not indicate that Paul was combating false teachers who wished to have the Gentile Colossians physically circumcised. Rather, he was using the symbolism of spiritual circumcision and baptism to illustrate to the Colossians how they had come to fullness in Christ (Col. 2:10) because he had purified them from sin.

Paul's use of the Greek particle kai ("also") demonstrates that his intent with this line of reasoning was not to counter teachers promoting physical circumcision. In verse 10, Paul stated that the Colossians had been made complete in Christ ("in him"). Paul uses kai in verse 11 to reinforce and connect this statement with his assertion about spiritual circumcision. The same usage of kai is also found in verse 12. The entire passage from verse 9 through 15 advances the theme of Christ's preeminence and sufficiency in atoning for sin.

COLOSSIANS 2:13 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 [cheirographon] that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. (NRSV)

Paul states in verse 13 that the Colossians had previously been considered "dead" because they were uncircumcised (i.e., Gentile) sinners. However, once they accepted Christ and were spiritually circumcised and baptized, their sins were forgiven because of Yeshua's sacrifice on the cross. Taken as a whole, verses 11 through 14 emphasize the redemption the Colossians had through the Messiah.

Many denominations teach that the phrase "handwriting of requirements that was against us" (NKJV) in verse 14 refers to God's Law. Because of this interpretation, they hold the antinomian position that Christ's death abolished the Law. Yet that interpretation doesn't fit the context here, because verses 11 through 14 talk of sins being wiped out. The abolishment of the Law would not make humans sinless, because sin was in the world before the Law was given (Rom. 5:13), and death reigned from Adam to Moses because of sin (Rom. 5:12, 14).

So what is Paul saying in verse 14? The term "handwriting of requirements" comes from the Greek phrase cheirographon tois dogmasin. In recent years scholars have found where the word cheirographon was used by other writers in the same time period to refer to a signed bill of indebtedness. Such bonds were handwritten by the debtor so they could not be disputed later on. The

word implies a sense of awareness of one's sins and the consequent indebtedness to God. Friberg defines cheirographon as "strictly, a handwritten document; in legal matters a promissory note, a record of indebtedness, bond; figuratively] in CO 2:14, not as the law itself, but as the record of charges (for breaking God's law), which stood against us and which God symbolically removed by 'nailing it to the cross,' handwritten account, record of debts."

Romans 6:23 tells us that the penalty for sin is death, because under the Law there can be no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood (Heb. 9:22, Lev. 17:11). Clearly, Paul is saying in verse 14 that when the Colossians repented and accepted Christ's sacrifice on the cross, God allowed His death to pay their debt in satisfaction of the strict standards of the Law.

COLOSSIANS 2:15 Having disarmed principalities and powers, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. (NKJV)

In verse 15, Paul says that Christ, through his sacrifice, has disarmed the spiritual principalities and powers that rule over this world (for more information on these spiritual rulers, see my article "The Heavenly Divine Council"). The Messiah has taken away the fallen angels' ability to accuse Christians of sin (Rev. 12:10) and lobby for their punishment according to the law, since their debt to the law was nailed to the cross.

COLOSSIANS 2:16 Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink [en brosei kai en posei], or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, 17 which are [esti] a shadow of things to come, but the substance is [soma] of Christ. (NKJV)

In verse 16, Paul comes to the primary point he wants to make. He tells the Colossians not to let anyone (including the Gnostics) judge them in eating or drinking, or in the observance of festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths.

This passage is widely misunderstood because most scholars begin with the assumption that the Sabbath, new moons, and Holy Days mentioned in verse 16 are among the false teachings Paul is combating. They assume that the Gentile Colossians were not keeping these days, but the heretics (who are usually labeled "Jewish Gnostics") were trying to force them to observe them. Two points discredit this theory.

First, Paul calls the Gnostic teachings the "tradition of men" (Col. 2:8) and the "commandments and doctrines of men" (Col. 2:22). Regardless of how Paul felt about the observances he lists in verse 16, being a Pharisee trained in the Law (Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5; Phi. 3:4-6), he would not have called them the "traditions of men." They are clearly defined in the Torah (Exo. 16, 20; Lev. 23; Deu. 16) as divine commands the Israelites were to obey.

Furthermore, it's clear that the heretics' teaching involved strict ascetic regulations (Col. 2:21-23). Yet asceticism is the opposite of feasting. You don't promote asceticism by encouraging the observance of feast days. Instead, you elevate asceticism by criticizing the way someone is keeping a feast, or by condemning the fact that they are celebrating a feast at all.



Because of an anti-Jewish bias which can be traced back to the early Catholic church, almost all scholars have misunderstood the meaning of Paul's statement in these verses. For the Gnostics to be judging the Colossians regarding the manner of observance of the Sabbath, new moons, and Holy Days, they obviously had to be keeping them!

The phrase "in food or in drink" does not accurately convey the meaning of the original text. The Greek reads "en brosei kai en posei" and refers to the acts of eating and drinking. The strict Gnostics were substituting an ascetic philosophy (Col. 2:8, "human tradition") and "doctrines of demons" (see I Tim. 4:1-3) for the truth that had previously been taught to the Colossians. They were evidently quick to find fault with anyone who did not follow their teaching of denying oneself food and drink.

The text shows that the Gnostic teachers were also condemning the Colossian Christians for their observance of the Sabbath, new moons, and Holy Days. The Gnostics' reason for judging the Colossians in these matters goes hand in hand with their criticism of "eating and drinking." Jews in the 1st century (as well as early Christians) treated the Sabbath as a weekly feast day, and fasting was forbidden on the Sabbath. In his book *From Sabbath To Sunday*, Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi writes:

. . . For the Jews the Sabbath was anything but a day of fast or of mourning. Even the strictest Jewish sects objected to fasting on the Sabbath . . . That the early Christians adopted this Jewish custom is implied, for instance, by Augustine's rhetorical remark, when referring to the Sabbath, he says: "Did not the tradition of the elders prohibit fasting on the one hand, and command rest on the other?" Further support can be seen in the opposition to the Sabbath fast by Christians in the East and in some important Western areas, such as Milan at the time of Ambrose (d. A.D. 397), and in certain churches and regions of North Africa. (pp. 187, 188)

Furthermore, during most of the annual festivals (with the exception of Atonement), God commanded his people to rejoice and enjoy food and strong drink (Deu. 14:23-26, Neh. 8:10,12). This most certainly would have conflicted with the Gnostics' ascetic outlook.

Because of the view that Paul was condemning the observance of the Sabbath, new moons, and Holy Days in verse 16, nearly all scholars have misunderstood verse 17. Most try to connect the first part of the verse ("which are a shadow of things to come") with the last part ("but the substance is of Christ") to form a complete thought. To accomplish this, they translate the last part of the verse to ("the") de ("but") soma ("substance is," "substance belongs to," "reality is") tou ("the") Christou ("of Christ").

As you can see above, the phrase "substance is" comes from the single Greek word soma. This word is used 74 times in the Textus Receptus version of the New Testament; 72 times the NKJV translates it as "body" and once it is represented as "bodies." Nowhere else is it rendered "substance is," "substance belongs to," or "reality is," as most modern versions of the Bible translate it in verse 17. In reality, these renderings of soma are unjustified interpretations, not translations.

The literal translation of the Greek in the last part of verse 17 is "but the body of Christ." In Greek, verses 16 and 17 say: "Consequently, let no one judge you in eating or in drinking with respect to a festival or a new moon or sabbaths (which are a shadow of things to come) but the body of Christ." The

phrase "body of Christ" should not be confusing, for Paul uses it several other times in the letter to the Colossians (1:18; 1:24; 2:19; 3:15), as well as in some of his other epistles (Rom., I Cor., and Eph.). In these instances it is a figurative reference to the Church.

Therefore, the phrase "which are a shadow of things to come" was intended by Paul to be a parenthetical statement. It was added to give the Colossians additional insight into the festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths. However, it was not necessary to complete the thought. Even if Paul had left that phrase out, his admonition would have been understandable: "Let no one judge you regarding eating and drinking (at these times) . . . but the body of Christ."

Paul is plainly saying here that the Church was to be the Colossians' only guide on eating and drinking, as these things related to Sabbath, new moon, and festival observances. They were not to let the Gnostics force ascetic practices on them, especially during these holy times (which are a shadow of the good things coming in the future - cf. Heb. 9:11, 10:1).

This grant of power to the Church is not unique in the writings of Paul. While he clearly condemns Christians who judge one another in questionable matters (Rom. 14), Paul gave the Corinthian Church the power to judge and expel those brethren who were openly sinning (I Cor. 5, 6). When combined with the earlier admonitions to hold fast to the teachings they had received previously (Col. 1:23; 2:6, 7), verses 16 and 17 clearly show that Paul expected the Colossian Church as a whole to enforce the original true teachings brought to them by Epaphras. Evidently those true teachings included the observance of the weekly and annual Sabbaths, new moons, and annual festivals.

One last point about verse 17; the word translated "are" is the Greek verb *esti*. This verb is in the present tense; Paul is saying the annual Holy Days and the Sabbath ARE currently shadows of things to come. Paul does not say that they were shadows that were fulfilled at the coming of Christ. From this we know that the events they foreshadow have not been completed yet; therefore, the shadows still have relevance. Instead of doing away with God's Sabbath and the Holy Days, this passage of Scripture, when understood correctly, affirms them and shows that the Colossian Church was actually keeping them.

COLOSSIANS 2:18 Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding [embateuon] into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom all the body [soma], nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase which is from God. (NKJV)

Now in verse 18, Paul warns the Colossians of two specific false doctrines being taught by the Gnostics: "false humility" as manifested in ascetic practices, and the worship of the angelic host. These teachings were probably the ones most emphasized by the Gnostics. In verse 19 Paul warns the congregation that these doctrines take one away from Christ, the head of the Church. Again, as in verse 17, we see the Church symbolically depicted as a "body."

Regarding Paul's use of the Greek word *embateuon* above, Friberg states, ". . . A second century inscription leads some to see it as a relig[ious] t[echnical] t[erm] for the second step of an initiate into

a mystery relig[ion] as he entered an inner sanctuary; enter into mysteries." Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament tells us that embateuon ". . . is used inversely to signify the action of those who have just received the mysteries (p. 535, vol. II)." Given the nature of Paul's argument to this point in the epistle, such a use of embateuon fits the context and appears reasonable.

COLOSSIANS 2:20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe [ton stoicheion tou kosmou], 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" 22 (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. (RSV)

The Bible consistently teaches that angelic beings currently rule over the world. Since the Colossians had symbolically died to the world at baptism (Col. 2:12; Rom. 6:4) and were considered "citizens of heaven" (Phi. 3:20), they were no longer under the authority of fallen angels. Now that they knew the one true God and were in His son Yeshua, the demons had no further dominion over them and no right to their obedience or worship. If they submitted to angelic powers as the Gnostics advocated, the Colossians would have been denying their salvation in Christ. Part of that submission consisted of ascetic regulations which prohibited sensory pleasures: "do not handle, do not taste, do not touch."

Verse 22 makes it clear that these prohibitions were human institutions. Every indication is that Paul is not referring to the Law in this chapter. Indeed, the word "law" is never used in the Colossian epistle. Evidently these false teachings were human traditions derived from demonic precepts (Col. 2:8; I Tim. 4:1-3).

In verse 23, Paul says that these doctrines might seem on the surface to promote wisdom and spiritual growth through the abuse of the physical body. Yet he concludes that they're really of no value in curtailing fleshly indulgence. Paul shifts gears in the third chapter and begins to exhort the Colossians to seek heavenly things, not the things which pertain to this world (Col. 3:1-2).

## CONCLUSION

The first two chapters of Paul's letter to the Colossians were intended to combat false teachings being advocated to the Christians in Colosse. These teachings apparently were a form of early Gnosticism, and they threatened to lead the Colossians away from the truth that had originally been given to them. Both subtly and explicitly, Paul counters these false doctrines and explains why Christ is the only valid mediator between God and mankind. He encourages the Colossians to hold fast to Christ, who is the head of his body, the Church. Paul ends by exposing the Gnostic doctrines for what they are: the demonically-inspired traditions of men.

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