

Paul's Letter to the Colossians Study
Bible Study Session 09
Colossians 2:16-19: Topic 5.2
Religious Ritualism

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Greek NT

16 Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων, 17 ἃ ἔστιν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ. 18 μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύετω θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων, εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, 19 καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὖξει τῆν αὐξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

16 Darum soll euch niemand verurteilen wegen eurer Ess- und Trinkgewohnheiten oder weil ihr bestimmte Festtage oder den Neumondstag oder den Sabbat nicht beachtet. 17 Das alles ist nur ein Schatten der kommenden neuen Welt; doch die Wirklichkeit ist Christus, und die ist schon zugänglich in seinem Leib, der Gemeinde. 18 Niemand soll euch das Heil absprechen, der sich in Demutsübungen und Engelverehrung gefällt und das mit irgendwelchen visionären Erlebnissen begründet. Solche Menschen blähen sich grundlos auf in ihrer rein irdischen Gesinnung, 19 statt sich an Christus zu halten, der doch der Herr über alles ist und das Haupt des Leibes, der Gemeinde. Von ihm her wird der ganze Leib zusammengehalten und versorgt, damit er zur vollen Größe emporwächst, wie es Gott gefällt.

NRSV

16 Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. 17 These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 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.

NLT

16 So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new-moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. 17 For these rules were only shadows of the real thing, Christ himself. 18 Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on self-denial. And don't let anyone say you must worship angels, even though they say they have had visions about this. These people claim to be so humble, but their sinful minds have made them proud. 19 But they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For we are joined together in his body by his strong sinews, and we grow only as we get our nourishment and strength from God.

The Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

Col. 2:16-19 is the second of three pericopes that touch on the false teaching present at Colossae. In 2:6-15 Paul introduced the false teaching in generalized terms as a man-made 'philosophy' that had the potential to taking individuals captive in spiritual enslavement. In 2:16-19 some of the content of this teaching is referenced. Finally, in 2:20-23 the appeal is made to recognize the phoniness of such teaching and thus reject it completely. The tone of warning is present in all three pericopes: 1) don't let someone take you captive; 2) don't let anyone condemn you for refusing certain religious practices; 3) don't fall prey to this nonsense because it is a non-Christian lifestyle.

¹Series study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

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The first and last of these three pericopes are introduced in similar ways: 1) “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord...” Ὡς οὖν παρελάβετε τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον; 3) “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe...” Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου. Also the common phrase “elemental spirits of the universe” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) shows up in both passages. The second pericope is linked to the first through ‘therefore’ (οὖν), and thus asserts that the second pericope contents flow out of implications contained in the first pericope. The third pericope has connections to the second with the religious rituals in 2:16-19 providing content for the label τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, “elemental spirits of the universe”. Thus all three pericopes are inner connected and together form a unit of expression that become the primary source for understanding the false teaching present at Colossae.

But describing the false teaching is not Paul’s objective for any of these passages. He does this only to the extent that it is necessary to admonish the Colossian believers to reject such distortions of the Christian faith. Getting the believers to shun such teaching is his objective.

Our task as interpreters of this text is thus more difficult. For us to understand thoroughly what was taking place at Colossae we have to evaluate this very limited information about the false teaching with some resulting conclusions about the identity of both individuals and teaching. With the very small amount of data about either the people or their teaching we are hard pressed to form a clear historical picture of the situation at Colossae. Consequently among present New Testament scholarship a wide range of conclusions can be found that are based upon the assessment of these texts.²

Historical Context:

Again consideration of the history of the transmission of the passage by copying, the External History, and of historical elements inside the passage, the Internal History, is important to the interpretive process.

External History. The editors of *The Greek New Testament* (4th rev. ed, published by the United Bible Societies) considered only one variation of wording in this passage to have enough significance to impact Bible translation. In verse eighteen, the phrase ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων, *dwelling on things he has seen*, is replaced with ἃ μὴ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων, *investigating things he has not seen*.³ The addition of the negative is due to a different understanding of the meaning of the participle ἐμβατεύων, as reflected in the above translation.⁴ The weight of the external evidence goes slightly in favor of the text reading, which tips the scales in this direction.



The critical apparatus of the Novum Testamentum Graece, 27th rev. ed. edited by Nestle and Aland contains six places where variations of readings surface.⁵ In none of these instances is there significant

²Such differing assessments should not be surprising. With the very minimal about of source data for drawing conclusions available, this data is subject to widely differing evaluations. This will be true even with the most cautious of genuine scholarly analysis. What is shocking to me is the carelessness and often baseless assumptions of many more conservative scholars who approach this issue with an unfounded dogmatism. Consequently their interpretive conclusions of the teaching of the scripture text have little credibility. Sincere love and respect of scripture requires honesty when analyzing the scripture texts! Lack of honesty in treating the text suggests to me insincere claims to love and respect scripture as God’s Word.

³{B} ἃ P⁴⁶ κ* A B D* I 6 33 424^c 1739 it^{b, d} vg^{mss} cop^{sa, bo} Marcion^{acc. to Tertullian} Origen^{gr, lat 2/3}; Ambrosiaster Lucifer Greek mss^{acc. to Jerome} Latin mss^{acc. to Augustine} Speculum // μὴ 81 // ἃ μὴ κ² C D² (F G ἃ οὐκ) Ψ 075 0150 104 256 263 365 424* 436 459 1175 1241 1319 (1573) 1852 1881 1912 1962 2127 2200 2464 Byz [(K ἃ μὴτε) L P] Lect it^{ar, f, g, mon, o} vg arm eth geo slav Origen^{grms, lat 1/3} Chrysostom Theodoret; Ambrose Greek mss^{acc. to Jerome} Jerome Pelagius Latin mss^{acc. to Augustine} Augustine

[Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini et al., *The Greek New Testament*, Fourth Revised Edition (With Apparatus); The Greek New Testament, 4th Revised Edition (With Apparatus) (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; Stuttgart, 2000; 2009).

⁴“The reading ἃ is strongly supported by P⁴⁶ and good representatives of the Alexandrian and the Western types of the text (κ* A B D* I 33 1739 it^d cop^{sa, bo} Speculum al). Apparently the negative (either οὐκ in F G or μὴ in κ^c C D^c K P Ψ 614 it^{ar, f, g, mon, o} vg sy^{rp}, h goth arm al) was added by copyists who either misunderstood the sense of ἐμβατεύων or wished to enhance the polemical nuance that is carried on by the following εἰκὴ φουσιούμενος. The singular reading μὴ (81) is an accidental scribal error.” [Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament* (4th Rev. Ed.) (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 556.]

⁵Kolosser 2,16

[* -νατω Lagarde cj] (The Aorist imperative form of κρίνω is used rather than the present imperative form.)

* ἦ κ A C D F G I Ψ 075. 0278. 33 M lat sy^h; Mcion^E Eus (ἦ replaces καὶ)
| txt P⁴⁶ B 1739. 1881 b vg^{ms}

Kolosser 2,17

* ὄ B F G 614 pc b d; Mcion^E Ambst Spec (ὄ replaces ἄ)

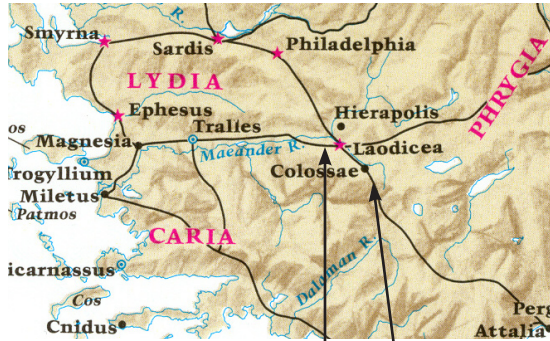
change of meaning in the text. Most represent attempts to update the style of the writing to a more contemporary pattern.

Consequently we can exegete the adopted text with certainty that it represents the original wording of the text.



Internal History. The time / place references in verses 16-19 center on whether the various religious practices mentioned have Jewish and / or Gentile origin. Those clearly Jewish in nature will have their roots in the Old Testament legal code in the Pentateuch. Those practices with possible Gentile origins, perhaps in the mystery religions of that time, are more difficult to identify historically.

The identifiable cultural tendency of the Lycus valley region of the Roman province of Asia does provide some background information that can help either to validate or to invalidate proposals for identifying the false teaching at Colossae.



The location of the city in the Lycus Valley of southwestern Turkey created a distinctive cultural atmosphere for the three primary cities there: Hierapolis, Laodicea,⁶ and Colossae. Laodicea was the largest of the three; Hierapolis the most influential; and Colossae the smaller, less significant one of the three. But all three were located within 15 kilometers of each other and were closely connected economically, culturally etc. Col. 4:13 implies a similar connectedness to the Christian communities in the three towns as the result of the ministry of Ephraim.⁷ The north-south trade route between Lydia and Pamphylia passed through the Lycus Valley; also the east-west trade route between the Euphrates River and the Aegean Sea moved

Kolosser 2,18

* κ* (The preposition ἐν is omitted in this mss)

* ᾧ (-81) μη κ² C D¹ Ψ 075. 0278. 1881 M; Hier^{mss} (ᾧ ἐόρακεν is replaced with ᾧ μη ἐόρακεν or ᾧ οὐκ ἐόρακεν)

| ᾧ οὐκ F G

| txt P46 κ* A B D* I 6. 33. 1739 pc b vgmss co; Or Ambst Hiermss Spec

Kolosser 2,19

* Χριστον D* 1505 (b) sy^h; Nov (MVict) (Χριστόν is inserted after κεφαλήν)

[Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 527.

⁶For information on Laodicea, see Rev. 3:14-22 (NRSV):

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation: 15 “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19 I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. 20 Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. 21 To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

⁷Col. 4:12-13 (NRSV): 12 Ephraim, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. 13 For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

12 ἀσπάζεται υἱὰς Ἐπαφράς ὁ ἐξ ὑμῶν, δοῦλος Χριστοῦ, πάντοτε ἀγωνιζόμενος ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐν ταῖς προσευχαῖς, ἵνα σταθῆτε τέλειοι καὶ πεπληροφορημένοι ἐν παντὶ θελήματι τοῦ θεοῦ. 13 μαρτυρῶ γὰρ αὐτῷ ὅτι ἔχει πολλὸν πόνον ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ τῶν ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ καὶ τῶν ἐν Ἱεραπόλει.

along the valley. Although by the 50s of the first Christian century a re-routing of the east-west trade route shifted this traffic from Colossae to Hierapolis and left Colossae somewhat off the main travel route,⁸ Colossae was still impacted by the large volume of trade flowing through the Lycus Valley from all four directions.⁹

The dominant settlement of Jews, Greeks and Phrygians in the valley created a core cultural variety that was supplemented by others from different parts of the ancient world settling in the valley for commercial purposes.¹⁰ The polytheistic religious orientation of everyone but Jews and Christians shaped a cultural mentality of free mixing and merging of ideas from diverse sources into a common way of thinking. Some of the ancient written sources suggest that even Jews were impacted by the 'open mindedness' to different ideas. All of this strongly suggests that the newly emerging Christian community in the Lycus Valley could easily be influenced by this cultural atmosphere to reach out to non-Christian sources as a way to 'supplement' their Christian understanding.¹¹



Upper Valley of the Lycus,
looking from Laodicea toward Colossae



How this social history of the area impacts the interpretation of 2:16-19 is mainly at the point of helping us to see how Christian teaching could easily reach out to non-Christian sources for 'supplementary insights' into its doctrinal structure. The prevailing cultural atmosphere encouraged this kind of syncretistic attitude toward life and religion.

⁸The two maps presented here illustrate what happened. The first map on the left page reflects the earlier location of the trade routes, especially the east-west route. The second map on the right portrays the trade routes after the re-routing and as they existed in the mid-first century world. Thus by the writing of this letter the city of Colossae was in a state of decline economically. Already the smallest of the three cities, this action by the Romans favoring Hierapolis pushed Colossae into a downward slide. Then with the earthquake in the 60s, the city never recovered. The health giving properties of the mineral springs around Hierapolis made the city popular for people seeking healing. The modern city of Hierapolis, now named Pamukkale, still enjoys popularity as a modern health spa oriented city.

⁹Also to be noted is that a major earthquake occurred in the 60s throughout the Lycus Valley and severely damaged all three cities, with Colossae being virtually destroyed. Colossae never recovered from this disaster, and gradually was abandoned in favor of Hierapolis and Laodicea, both of which recovered and subsequently prospered. This historical reality is a strong argument against those who deny Pauline authorship of the letter in favor of a later writing by disciples of Paul. The letter in that case was written by a fictitious author to a non-existing church in a no longer functioning city.

¹⁰"The Lycus valley is the meeting point of ancient Caria, Lydia and Phrygia, and it looks like the gateway that it is. On the one hand it is closely connected with the lowlands. The olive grows only as far east as Denizli. The region produces sesame, vegetables, fruits and almonds. Where water is plentiful there are groves of trees. But east of here trees are infrequent. The Lycus is on the edge of the steppe land, the lonely sheep country. The ravines of the upper Maeander and Lycus lead northeast and southeast into Phrygia. At the northwest end there is an easy pass over the hills, probably not more than 2000 feet high, into the Hermus valley.

"The valley was accordingly the junction point of several important roads. Two main routes—now followed by the railroads—led from the Aegean coast to the Anatolian hinterland. One ran from Ephesus up the Maeander valley, past Magnesia and Tralles, to Laodicea; then it turned southeast to follow the Lycus and went to Apamea, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Tyana, and, through the pass in the Taurus known as the Cilician gates, to Tarsus. The south gate of Laodicea was significantly called the Syrian gate. The second route eastward followed the Hermus valley from Smyrna to Sardis and Philadelphia, then ascended the Phrygian mountains in the direction of Ancyra (the modern Ankara).

"Laodicea was the first and most important junction point in the system. The two main routes were connected by a road from Laodicea and Hierapolis to Tripolis and Philadelphia. In addition roads ran south over the mountains to Attalia and Perga on the Pamphylian coast, and northeast across Phrygia to Lounda and Brouzos."

[G. Ernest Wright, vol. 13 numbers 1-4, *Biblical Archaeologist* : Volume 13 1-4, electronic ed. (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001).]

¹¹"Coins of the city show that in the Roman period Isis and Serapis were worshipped here, together with Helios, Demeter, Selene, Artemis the huntress and the Ephesian Artemis, and the native Phrygian god Men. Paul's letter to the Colossians lifts the veil a little, and discloses a church whose members were attracted toward a curious perversion of Christianity, in which Jewish and pagan elements were mingled. The letter speaks of reverence to angels (1:16; 2:15, 18), rules or scruples about foods and holy days (2:16), and some type of asceticism (2:23; 3:5-10). If the obscure verse 2:18 refers to a pride produced by visions and revelations, it does not seem strange in a Phrygian background." [G. Ernest Wright, vol. 13 numbers 1-4, *Biblical Archaeologist* : Volume 13 1-4, electronic ed. (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001).]

This social history doesn't give much help to the question of whether this teaching arose from somewhere else and was carried into the Lycus Valley from the outside, or, whether this was a locally produced set of ideas. It does, however, tend to favor the latter perspective of the source of this teaching.

Literary Aspects:

Once more the literary aspects of the text are important for understanding this scripture text.

Literary Form. The literary genre of 2:16-19 is *paraenesis* at the point of a warning given to the initial readers of the letter. Clearly, the text is a part of the letter body, and thus presupposes the aspects of the ancient letter that we have discussed in previous studies. The passage is composed of two Greek sentences, vv. 16-17, 18-19, both of which have warnings as the core expression: 1) **Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω** (“do not let anyone condemn you”), and 2) **μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύετω** (“Do not let anyone disqualify you”). Both admonitions encourage the Colossians to reject the teachings that are being presented to them as important aspects of Christian belief and practice. They reflect an interesting perspective. The first, **Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω**, calls for resistance to anyone claiming an inadequate Christian experience for the Colossians based on failure to follow certain religious rituals. The second, **μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύετω**, shifts the perspective with the figurative idea of an athletic umpire judging against the Colossians and thus robbing them of the prize they should receive. The two images complement one another by reversing the perspective. The false teachers at Colossae were saying that if the folks didn't practice the rituals they advocated the believers wouldn't be saved. Paul comes back to say that if the Colossians accept this negative judgment against their practice of apostolic Christianity, they are letting these false teachers rob them of the prize of God's blessings upon His true people. In both perspectives the apostle is strongly advocating that the Colossians resist continuously the influence of these teachers¹² and their teachings.

Literary Setting. As mentioned in the above introduction and as illustrated in the outline to the right, Col. 2:16-19 stands as the second pericope in Paul's discussion of Christian living, largely in terms of advocating continuation in the apostolic teaching in opposition to the alternative teaching being promoted at Colossae.

Each of the three units contains a distinctive emphasis both upon the nature of the Christian life as well as allusions to the nature and content of the false teaching. In 2:6-15, the complete adequacy of their conversion experience and the Christian truth given to them at that time is claimed as the basis for developing a Christian lifestyle for all one's journey through life. The alternative teaching has the potential to 'take them captive' and enslave them in a false approach to Christian living. This claim is that it is somehow based on an assertion that something is missing in Christ and His redemptive work in salvation, and must be supplemented by this alternative teaching.

In 2:16-19, the focus shifts to stressing some of the content of this false teaching being prompted at Colossae. The two warnings stress the outward, ritual oriented nature of this false teaching. Several topics are addressed as false teachings and not appropriate or beneficial for believers seeking to please God in their living: “in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths,” (ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων) and “self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head” (θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἐόρακεν ἐμβατεύων, εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν). In verses 17, and 18b-19, the inadequacies of these teachings by their inherent nature are set forth.

In 2:20-23, the focus shifts again to characterizing this teaching as having a pre-Christian, pagan character with a demonic element, and thus being

Outline of Colossians

Praescriptio

Introduction: 1:1-2
Superscriptio: 1:1
Adscriptio: 1:2a
Salutatio: 1:2b

Proem

Thankfulness: 1:3-8

Body

Intercession: 1:9-12
Christus Hymnus: 1:13-20
Reconciliation: 1:21-23

Paul's Ministry 1: 1:24-29
Paul's Ministry 2: 2:1-5

Christian Living 1: 2:6-15
Christian Living 2: 2:16-19
Christian Legalism: 2:20-23

Seeking the Heavenly Things: 3:1-4
Christian Behavior: 3:5-11
Getting Dressed: 3:12-17

Haustafeln: 3:18-4:1
Husband/Wife: 3:18-19
Father/Children: 3:20-21
Master/Slaves: 3:22-4:1

Admonitions and Requests: 4:2-6

Conclusio

Tychicus: 4:7-9
Greetings: 4:10-17
Closing: 4:18

Letter Validation: 4:18a
Prayer Request: 4:18b
Benedictio: 4:18c

¹²Note that in both verbs the emphasis is upon the false teachers more than on their teachings: “don't let anyone...”

dangerous for believers to consider adopting. In their conversion the Colossians ‘died’ spiritually to this kind of nonsense. To return to it in the name of a ‘superior’ Christianity is incredulous and makes no sense what so ever. Further practices of pietistic portrayal using self imposed physical abuse as the mark of spirituality are condemned.

Thus Col. 2:16-19 stand in this literary setting as a critically important passage for understanding the phoney Christianity being advocated at Colossae.



Literary Structure:

The block diagram of the Greek text visually illustrates the inner connectedness of the ideas contained in verses 16-19. Here the text is rather simple and uncomplicated, in comparison to many of the sentences in Colossians. The rather literalistic English translation of the Greek text below highlights this:

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2.16      Therefore
18  let no one condemn you
           by food
           and
           by drink
           or
           by observing festivals
                   or
                   new moons
                   or
                   sabbaths;
           which are a shadow of the coming things,
2.17  but
19  the body is Christ's.
20 2.18 Let no one disqualify you,
           insisting
           on self abasement
           and
           the worship of angels,
           focusing on what is seen,
           vainly being puffed up
           by his own fleshly mind,
2.19      and
           not holding fast to the head,
           /-----|
           from whom the entire body...grows up with God's growth.
                                           through the ligaments
                                           and
                                           sinews,
                                           being nourished
                                           and
                                           being held together

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In the two sentences, vv. 16-17 (#s 18-19) and 18-19 (# 20), one can detect how Paul puts his ideas together to deliver his warnings to the Colossians. The two central admonitions, #s 18 and 20, form the foundation of the thought structure. Statement 19 in verse 17 is connected to statement 18 as a contrastive clarification to the falseness of the contention of the false teaching. The two admonitions complement each

other and both address the same essential issue of the false teaching and the perspectives reflected in it.

Exegesis of the Text:

Judgmentalism rejected, vv. 16-17:

16 Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. 17 These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

16 Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων, 17 ἃ ἔστιν σκιὰ τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

Two elements of this sentence merit close analysis: the admonition and the depiction of the false teaching.

The admonition: “do not let anyone condemn you” (Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω). The use of the verb κρίνω in this context carries the sense of someone ‘sitting in judgment, especially negative judgment’ about another person. The English translations’ dominant tendency is to express this as ‘let no one judge you’ or ‘let no one pass judgment on you.’¹³ Of course no one can prevent another from expressing a negative opinion about them, but this is not Paul’s point. Instead, he admonishes the Colossians to completely ignore and reject any such negative opinion thrust at them.¹⁴ From a Bible translator’s perspective, Bratcher and Nida suggest the following:¹⁵

The verb *krinō* means primarily “to judge” (see, for example, in a similar context, Rom 14:3). Here the more general *make rules* may be more appropriate (compare GeCL¹⁶“let no one dictate to you...”). Other ways of translating it are “criticize” (SpCL Brc), “take you to task” (Mft NEB). JB has “never let anyone else decide...”

These false teachers were criticizing the non-participation in several religious rituals by the Colossian believers. This was intended to coerce them into submission to the legalism being advocated. We have no clear way of knowing exactly how they did this, although the context strongly suggests that at least a part of their argument was that such regulations must be closely followed in order to have right standing before God. This carried with it clear implications that something was missing in the work of Christ in providing for salvation, and had to be ‘filled in’ by the individual believer’s adherence to a set of rules about Christian

¹³Note the patterns: “let no one judge you” -- ASV, AV 1873, HCSB, ISV, KJV, NET, NIV, NIRV, NKJV, TNIV, YLT; “let no one pass judgment on you” -- ESV, ESV rev. int., HDNT, RSV. Other patterns include: “don’t ever let one of those big shots jump all over you” - Cotton Patch Version; “let no one make rules about what you” - GNT; “do not let anyone make rules for you” - NCV; “don’t put up with anyone pressuring you” - The Message; “no one is to act as your judge” - NASB 1995; “don’t let anyone condemn you” - NLT, NRSV, NRSV rev. int., ; “Stop therefore allowing anyone to be sitting in judgment upon you” - Wuest.

“que nadie se constituya en vuestro juez” - BdA; “que nadie se constituya en juez de ustedes (nadie los juzgue)” - NBLH; “nadie os juzgue” - BR-V Antiqua; “Por tanto, nadie os juzgue” - R-V 1960; “Por tanto, nadie os critique” - R-V 1995; “No dejéis que nadie os critique” - Castilian; “que nadie los critique a ustedes” - DHH; “no permitan que nadie los condene” - NTV; “Así que nadie los juzgue a ustedes” - NVI; “Por eso les digo: no permitan que nadie les diga” - PDT; “No permitan, pues, que nadie los juzgue” - R-VC; “No dejen que nadie los critique” - Tla.

“Que personne donc ne vous juge” - Segond 1910, Segond 21, NEG 1979; “Que personne donc ne vous condamne” - Osterwald; “C’est pourquoi, ne vous laissez juger par personne” - BS;

“So lasset nun niemand euch Gewissen machen” - Luther 1545, 1912; “So lasst euch nun von niemandem ein schlechtes Gewissen machen” - Luther 1984; “So richte euch nun niemand” - Elberfelder 1905; “Darum lasst euch keine Vorschriften machen” - HfA; “Niemand soll euch also Vorhaltungen machen” - NGÜ; “So soll euch nun niemand richten” - Schlachter 1951; “So lasst euch von niemand richten” - Schlachter 2000; “Darum soll euch niemand verurteilen” - GNB; “Darum soll niemand...absprechende Urteile über euch abgeben” - Menge-Bibel; “Darum soll euch niemand verurteilen” - EÜ; “Darum soll niemand über euch zu Gericht sitzen” - ZB; “Lasst euch deshalb von niemandem verurteilen” - NLB.

¹⁴“Having built up to such an impressive climax regarding the significance of Christ’s death, Paul and Timothy proceed to draw out the immediate corollary (οὖν). Clearly what is envisaged is a situation where the Colossian believers were being (or might be) criticized for their conduct in respect of dietary rules and festival days. Equally clearly the line of reply is that a proper understanding of the significance of Christ’s death would render such criticism unnecessary, irrelevant, or wrong. By implication those who made such criticism were themselves failing to grasp the significance of the cross.” [James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 171.]

¹⁵Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Helps for translators; UBS handbook series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 65.

¹⁶GeCL GeCL German common language translation

living.

Robert Wall provides an interesting application of this core idea that merits consideration:¹⁷

Sociologist James Davison Hunter, in his recent book on evangelicalism, characterized historic evangelicalism as “world-denying.” In order to draw more sharply the social borders that distinguish the orthodox from all others, evangelical believers tend to draft creeds of right belief and codes of right conduct that oblige them to abstain from certain foods (such as alcohol) and practices (such as dancing or extravagant dress) that mainstream believers consider spiritually harmless. Ascetic and austere expressions of one’s devotion to Christ are thought by evangelicals to be useful in bearing witness to Christianity as an alternative to the values and convictions of the surrounding secular order. And to a certain extent this is a correct perception. Paul has already stressed in his opening thanksgiving prayer (1:3–12) that the gospel produces the fruit of transformed character, a changed people who know what is true and live according to it. Faith should expect moral results.

The problem Paul addresses in this passage, however, 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”: one’s devotion is measured by how drab and dreary one’s Christianity is! The arrogant sloganeering that asserts that the simpler the lifestyle, the greater the holiness, does not wash with Paul. For him, the mark of true religion is not a rigorous compliance to rules of self-denial, but faith in Christ and a life in his Spirit (see Rom 14:13–18). What finally defines the borders of true Christianity is “being in Christ,” where God’s grace transforms a 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 finally useless.

The false teaching: “in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. 17 These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” (ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων, 17 ἃ ἔστιν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ.)

Paul’s depicts several requirements laid down by these false teachers, and then points out the failure of this teaching.

The requirements mentioned here have to do with observing dietary regulations and a religious calendar.¹⁸ One of the ongoing questions raised is concerning the origin and orientation of the demands in these two areas of food and religious observance. At first glance, the demands seem to come out of a Jewish background with a foundation in the dietary code¹⁹ of the Law of Moses for the ‘eating and drinking’

¹⁷Robert W. Wall, *Colossians & Philemon*, The IVP New Testament commentary series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Col 2:16–18.

¹⁸“It is presumably not a matter of coincidence that the first issue mentioned over which the ‘someone’ might take the addressees to task is the question of food and drink. The use of the verb κρίνω (‘criticise’ in NJB, ‘condemn’ in NRSV) also indicates clearly enough that what would be under attack was failure to observe certain dietary rules. Both features at once suggest the importance which traditional Judaism laid on the food laws and the fierceness with which traditional Jews insisted on maintenance of their practice as a vital test case of Jewish identity and faithfulness to God’s covenant with Israel. At the root of this concern were the important rules regarding clean and unclean food in Lev. 11:1–23 and Deut. 14:3–21. These had been given a much heightened significance by the Maccabean crisis, where resistance on this issue was one of the make-or-break points. ‘Many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die’ (1 Macc. 1:62–63). Thereafter observance of the food laws was counted a fundamental mark of loyalty to nation and religion, as we may see in popular Jewish tales of the time, in which the heroes or heroines are presented as models of piety acknowledged by God precisely in terms of their refusal to eat the food of Gentiles (Dan. 1:3–16; 10:3; Tob. 1:10–12; Jdt. 12:2, 19; Add. Est. 14:17; Joseph and Asenath 7:1; 8:5). Such Jewish scruples were well known in the ancient world (see, e.g., GLAJJ §§63, 196, 258, 281, 301). Further factors affecting Jewish eating were the kosher laws requiring that the blood be properly drained from an animal fit for food (e.g., Lev. 7:26–27; Deut. 12:16, 23–24)⁶ and the fear prominent among diaspora Jews of eating meat from animals sacrificed in Gentile temples, which was contaminated by idolatry (see, e.g., Schürer 2.81–83). In short, observance of various restrictions on food was essential to Jewish identity and to a Jewish way of life in the diaspora.” [James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 171–72.]

¹⁹In modern Judaism this is known as Kosher food, as is explained in “Kashrut” Wikipedia online:

“Kashrut (also kashruth or kashrus, כַּשְׁרוּת) is the set of Jewish dietary laws. Food in accord with halakha (Jewish law) is termed kosher in English, from the Ashkenazi pronunciation of the Hebrew term kashér (כָּשֵׁר), meaning “fit” (in this context, fit for consumption by Jews according to traditional Jewish law). Food that is not in accordance with Jewish law is called treif (Yiddish: טרייף or treyf, derived from Hebrew: תְּרֵפָה trēfáh).

“Many of the basic laws of kashrut are derived from the Torah’s Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, with their details set down in the oral law (the Mishnah and the Talmud) and codified by the Shulchan Aruch and later rabbinical authorities. The Torah does not explicitly state the reason for most kashrut laws, and many varied reasons have been offered for these laws, ranging from philosophical and ritualistic to practical and hygienic.”

reference.²⁰ But this code, found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, focuses only on meat and says very little about drinking. Consequently many scholars are convinced that what was being advocated at Colossae had moved beyond the Old Testament standards for Jews.²¹ Abstinence from food and drink was practiced widely in the ancient world outside of Judaism, and for a variety of reasons, as Peter O'Brien notes:²²

There are various reasons why abstinence from food and drink was practiced in the ancient world: the belief in the transmigration of souls might prevent a person from eating meat. Some practiced asceticism since it was bound up with their views of purity. Others thought that by fasting one served the deity, came closer to him or prepared oneself for receiving a divine revelation, a point that is important in the light of verse 18 (see Behm, *TDNT* 4, 924–35, especially 926, where the relevant Hellenistic texts are noted). The observance of taboos and sacred times in the Colossian “philosophy” seems to have been related to obedient submission to the “elemental spirits of the universe” (cf. v 20).

The advocating of abstinence from certain food and drink by the false teachers was intended to enhance the individual's relationship with God in some unspecified way. But Jesus already had nullified this kind of thinking in Mark 7:14-23, where He set aside the dietary code of the Old Testament as having no validity for His followers:

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, **“Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”**

16 17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 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, 19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)** 20 And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

14 Καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος πάλιν τὸν ὄχλον ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· **Ἀκούσατέ μου πάντες καὶ σύνετε. 15 οὐδὲν ἐστὶν ἔξωθεν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς αὐτὸν ὃ δύναται κοινῶσαι αὐτόν· ἀλλὰ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενά ἐστιν τὰ κοινῶντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον.**

17 Καὶ ὅτε εἰσῆλθεν εἰς οἶκον ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄχλου, ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ τὴν παραβολήν. 18 καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· Οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀσύνετοί ἐστε; **οὐ νοεῖτε ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἔξωθεν εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς τὸν ἄνθρωπον οὐ δύναται αὐτὸν κοινῶσαι, 19 ὅτι οὐκ εἰσπορεύεται αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἀλλ’ εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν, καὶ εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται;— καθαρίζω πάντα τὰ βρώματα.** 20 ἔλεγεν δὲ ὅτι Τὸ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκεῖνο κοινοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον· 21 ἔσθωθεν γὰρ ἐκ τῆς καρδίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων οἱ διαλογισμοὶ οἱ κακοὶ ἐκπορεύονται, πορνεῖαι, κλοπαί, φόνοι, 22 μοιχεῖαι, πλεονεξίαι, πονηρίαι, δόλος, ἀσέλγεια, ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρὸς, βλασφημία, ὑπερηφανία, ἀφροσύνη· 23 πάντα ταῦτα τὰ πονηρὰ ἔσθωθεν ἐκπορεύεται καὶ κοινοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον.

But these false teachers at Colossae looked more to their culture than to Jesus and put forth teaching in direct contradiction to the teaching of Jesus. They reflect a classic example of adopting the ways of the surrounding world even when those ways have been rejected and condemned by Christ Himself. Also it should be noted that abstinence from food and drink is connected closely to the ‘severe treatment of the body’ (ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος) in verse 23. Doing without certain prohibited foods was a part of the program of rigid disciplining of the corrupt flesh. Flagellation of the body and other actions were also a part of this.

The reference to religious festivals, “of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths,” suggest a Jewish origin,²³ in particular the reference to ‘sabbaths’ since no one but Jews observed a sabbath in the ancient

²⁰Rom. 14:17 οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ βρώσις καὶ πόσις, ἀλλὰ δικαιοσύνη κ.τ.λ., Heb. 9:10 ἐπὶ βρώμασιν καὶ πόμασιν καὶ διαφόροις βαπτισμοῖς, δικαιώματα σαρκός, comp. 1 Cor. 8:8 βρῶμα δὲ ἡμᾶς οὐ παραστήσει τῷ Θεῷ κ.τ.λ.” [Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, 8th ed. (London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1886), 190.]

²¹For example, Peter O'Brien, [vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 137], who reflects a large number of careful scholars:

“Paul is probably not referring directly to the OT food laws since the Torah contained no prohibitions respecting drinks, except in a few special cases (e.g. of priests ministering in the tabernacle, Lev. 10:9; of liquids contained in unclean vessels, Lev 11:34, 36; and of Nazirite vows, Num 6:3; on βρώσις, “eating,” “food,” see Behm, *TDNT* 1, 642–45, and on πόσις, “drinking,” “drink,” note Goppelt, *TDNT* 6, 145–48). Nor is he directing attention to abstentions similar to those enjoined in the apostolic letter of Acts 15:23–29 in which Gentiles without compromising their Christian liberty were to behave considerately to their “weaker brethren” of Jewish birth. Rather, these are more stringent regulations of an ascetic nature apparently involving the renunciation of animal flesh and of wine and strong drink, after a Nazirite fashion. They follow from the demand of “severe treatment of the body” (v 23), whereby abstinence from certain food is required (v 21; cf 1 Tim 4:3).”

²²O'Brien, *Ibid.*, 138.

²³Especially see Gal. 4:10-11 and Rom. 14:5-6, where the background is clearly Jewish in origin:

Gal. 4:9-11, “9 Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again

world. The sequence is of years, months, weeks, and alludes to a religious calendar where periodic times of temple worship were required, along with the celebration of the 'new moon' and a weekly day of rest and worship. Yet distinctives from the Old Testament mandates can be seen here as well:²⁴

The terms "festival" (ἑορτή), "new moon" (νεομηνία) and "sabbath" (σάββατα) often occur in the OT to describe special days dedicated to God (LXX Hos 2:13; Ezek 45:17; 1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 2:3; 31:3). For Israel the keeping of these holy days was evidence of obedience to God's law and a sign of her election among the nations. At Colossae, however, the sacred days were to be kept for the sake of the "elemental spirits of the universe," those astral powers who directed the course of the stars and regulated the order of the calendar. So Paul is not condemning the use of sacred days or seasons as such; it is the wrong motive involved when the observance of these days is bound up with the recognition of the elemental spirits.

Again the Colossian false teachers reached out beyond the Old Testament to find a basis for their teaching.²⁵ The Jewish heritage evidently formed the starting point, but needed to be supplemented from non-Jewish and non-Christian sources from their own world.²⁶ Again, the point of these regulations seems to be that observance of these 'holy days' would within itself make one more acceptable to God.

to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? 10 You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. 11 I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted."

9 νῦν δὲ γνόντες θεόν, μᾶλλον δὲ γνωσθέντες ὑπὸ θεοῦ, πῶς ἐπιστρέφετε πάλιν ἐπὶ τὰ ἄσθενη καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα, οἷς πάλιν ἄνωθεν δουλεῦειν θέλετε; 10 ἡμέρας παρατηρεῖσθε καὶ μῆνας καὶ καιροὺς καὶ ἐνιαυτοὺς. 11 φοβοῦμαι ὑμᾶς μή πως εἰκῆ κεκοπίακα εἰς ὑμᾶς.

Rom. 14:5-6, "5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. 6 Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God."

5 Ὃς μὲν κρίνει ἡμέραν παρ' ἡμέραν, ὃς δὲ κρίνει πᾶσαν ἡμέραν· ἕκαστος ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ νοῖ πληροφορεῖσθω· 6 ὁ φρονῶν τὴν ἡμέραν κυρίῳ φρονεῖ. καὶ ὁ ἐσθίων κυρίῳ ἐσθίει, εὐχαριστεῖ γὰρ τῷ θεῷ· καὶ ὁ μὴ ἐσθίων κυρίῳ οὐκ ἐσθίει, καὶ εὐχαριστεῖ τῷ θεῷ.

²⁴O'Brien, *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁵The pattern points to the ancient versions of astrology that were current in the beginning Christian century. For details see "Astrology," Wikipedia online.

²⁶That a strong Jewish heritage is foundational to these rituals is very clear. But to restrict them to Judaism falls short of Paul's depiction here. Thus Dunn is inadequate in his assessment of the exclusive Jewish orientation here:

The already strong implication that the Colossian "philosophy" was basically Jewish in character is further strengthened by the other items over which the Colossian believers might be criticized or condemned and which we may likewise deduce were central to the Colossian "philosophy": "in the matter of [see BAGD s.v. μέρος 1c] a festival or new moon or sabbath." The first of these three terms, "festival" (ἑορτή), is unspecific: such feasts, festivals, and holidays were common to all societies (LSJ s.v.), and though elsewhere in the New Testament the "feast" in question is one of the traditional Jewish feasts (Passover or Tabernacles), the term itself occurs only here in the Pauline corpus. The second term (νεομηνία) is equally imprecise: the new moon was reckoned to have a religious significance and celebrated accordingly in most ancient societies, though here again that included the Jewish cult (e.g., Num. 10:10; 2 Kgs. 4:23; Ps. 81:3; Isa. 1:13; Ezek. 46:3, 6; see further G. Delling, TDNT 4:639-41).

However, the issue is put beyond doubt by the third element, the "sabbath." The sabbath was another Jewish tradition which marked out Jews as distinctive from Gentiles, another essential mark of Jewish identity and covenant belonging (Exod. 31:16-17; Deut. 5:15; Isa. 56:6). Even before the Maccabean crisis, "violating the sabbath" was ranked with "eating unclean food" as one of the two chief marks of covenant disloyalty (Josephus, Antiquities 11:346). And its increasing importance for Judaism is indicated by the developing sabbath law, as attested both within other Jewish groups of the time (Jubilees 2:17-33; 50:6-13; CD 10:14-11:18) and by the Gospels (Mark 2:23-3:5 pars.). Characteristically Jewish also is the practice of referring to the "sabbath" in the plural, τὰ σάββατα, as here (Lightfoot 192; BAGD s.v. σάββατον 1bβ). It is true that the most unusual practice of maintaining one day in seven as a day of rest proved attractive to sympathetic Gentiles (Philo, De vita Mosis 2:21; Josephus, Contra Apionem 2:282; Juvenal, Satirae 14:96), but a critical or judgmental attitude on the subject, as here, is much more likely to express a traditional Jewish attitude, defensive of identity and covenant distinctiveness.

But if sabbath is so clearly a distinctively Jewish festival, then the probability is that the "festival" and "new moon" also refer to the Jewish versions of these celebrations. The point is put beyond dispute when we note that the three terms together, "sabbaths, new moons, and feasts," was in fact a regular Jewish way of speaking of the main festivals of Jewish religion (1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:3; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Isa. 1:13-14; 1 Macc. 10:34; Ezek. 45:17, and Hos. 2:11 in reverse order, as here; see, e.g., Sappington 163; Aletti, *Épître aux Colossiens* 193 n. 112). In view of later discussion we should also note that the Essenes claimed to have received special revelation regarding "the holy sabbaths and glorious feasts" and also the new moon (CD 3:14-15; 1QS 9:26-10:8). We must conclude, therefore, that all the elements in this verse bear a characteristically and distinctively Jewish color, that those who cherished them so critically must have been the (or some) Jews of Colossae, and that their criticism arose from Jewish suspicion of Gentiles making what they would regard as unacceptable claims to the distinctive Jewish heritage without taking on all that was most distinctive of that heritage.⁸

[James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 174-75.]

Paul adamantly rejected both streams of teaching in verse 17, by playing off the contrastive terms of 'shadow' and 'reality': ἡ ἔστιν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ, *These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.* In adopting this terminology Paul utilizes terms often employed in that world to distinguish between phoney appearance and substantive reality.²⁷ What the false teachers were promoting was phoney reality. Authentic reality is based solely in Christ, who reflects the absolute 'fullness of God' (cf. 2:9).²⁸ These teachers were taking man made ideas and presenting them as divine truth, but all they were was phoney substitutes for Christ.

Modern Christianity continues to be plagued by similar traits and tendencies. These become a 'religion of the flesh' that promote human accomplishment before God. And thus they become ego trips for the worshipper pushing himself as superior to others and thus deserving God's approval. But God rejects all such false actions, as Jesus made abundantly clear in Mt. 7:21-23.²⁹ Authentic Christianity is centered on Christ and rejects efforts to infuse human accomplishment into its relationship to God. The urge toward human accomplishment in religion is very strong, and difficult to resist. Something lies inside most people that says, "You've got to do something to earn God's approval." Complete acceptance of the grace of God runs counter to our pride. Paul sensed such and strongly condemned the teachers pushing such in the Lycus Valley. We would do well to listen carefully to him today! We must come to realize the total adequacy of Christ and His redeeming work for us on the cross. What we do in obedience is not intended nor designed to merit His approval. Rather it is the response of profound gratitude and loving devotion to a Savior who has accomplished so much in our behalf.

Disqualification avoided, vv. 18-19:

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.

18 μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύετω θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκειᾷ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἐόρακεν ἐμβατεύων, εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, 19 καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὔξει τὴν αὔξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ.

The second warning continues the apostle's rejection of this false teaching in a manner similar to the preceding one in vv. 16-17.

²⁷"The opposition between outer appearance and the real essence, as it was taught in Platonic philosophy, was a theme repeatedly considered and described in Hellenistic times. True being belongs to ideas and not to the shadows they cast in this world, which are perceived by our senses. The concepts most frequently used to describe this contrast are: σκιά (shadow) and εἰκῶν (form, image). At times, however, "body" (σῶμα) is used instead of "form" (εἰκῶν) to describe the true reality as distinguished from mere appearance. Philo, for example, discussing the allegorical method of interpretation, explains that the words of the divine oracle are like "the shadows of the bodies" (σκιάς τινος ὡσανεὶ σωμάτων) and that the meanings revealed in the latter are "the things that really and truly exist" (τὰ ὑφ' ἑστώτα ἀληθείᾳ πράγματα *De conf. ling.* 190). "Shadow" (σκιά) is related to "body" (σῶμα) as the "copy" (μίμημα) to the "original" (ἀρχέτυπος *De migr. Abr.* 12). Josephus narrates how Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, was trying to obtain Augustus' confirmation of the kingship bequeathed him by his father. In doing so, Archelaus met with the reproach that he had not really waited for Caesar's decision. For in reality he had already begun to rule as King and now appeared in Rome "begging for the shadow of royalty, of which he had already appropriated the body" (σκιὰν αἰτησόμενος βασιλείας, ἧς ἤρπασεν ἑαυτῷ τὸ σῶμα *Bell.* 2, 28). The shadow is mere appearance; "body" (σῶμα), however, is the reality." [Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 118]

²⁸Note how Paul addresses something similar in **Rom. 14:17**,

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

οὐ γάρ ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ βρώσις καὶ πόσις, ἀλλὰ δικαιοσύνη καὶ εἰρήνη καὶ χαρὰ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.

²⁹**Mt. 7:21-23** (NRSV): 21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' 23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'"

21 Οὐ πᾶς ὁ λέγων μοι: Κύριε κύριε εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν, ἀλλ' ὁ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. 22 πολλοὶ ἐροῦσίν μοι ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ: Κύριε κύριε, οὐ τῷ σὺ ὄνοματι ἐπροφητεύσαμεν, καὶ τῷ σὺ ὄνοματι δαιμόνια ἐξεβάλομεν, καὶ τῷ σὺ ὄνοματι δυνάμεις πολλὰς ἐποιήσαμεν; 23 καὶ τότε ὁμολογήσω αὐτοῖς ὅτι Οὐδέποτε ἔγνω ὑμᾶς· ἀποχωρεῖτε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν.

The admonition: “Do not let anyone disqualify you” (μηδεις ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύτω). With picturesque language Paul admonishes the Colossians to resist efforts to declare them unqualified before God because they don’t adhere to the teachings of the false teachers.³⁰ The athletic metaphor in the background pictures an official disqualifying an athlete falsely by awarding the winner’s prize to someone else who was unqualified.³¹ These false teachers were attempting to do this to the Colossians because of non-compliance with their set of rules and regulations. Their message to the Colossians was simply, “You comply with these rules or else God will banish you to Hell!” Paul vigorously encouraged the Colossians to reject such demands and claims. “Don’t listen to their demands,” Paul said, “for they will only lead to trouble.”

The false teaching: “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.” (θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἐόρακεν ἐμβατεύων, εἰκὴ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, 19 καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὔξει τὴν αὔξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ.)

In these two verses the apostle lines out a few more of the demands of the false teachers, but spends more time exposing the phoniness of this teaching.

The false teachers were placing emphasis upon “self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions” (ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἐόρακεν ἐμβατεύων). Paul uses their terms here and then characterizes the phoney nature of these practices.³²

The heart of these actions reflect a Greek dualistic background in which ultimate deity cannot be contacted directly, but must be approached through intermediaries, i.e., angels. Note Eduard Lohse’s helpful analysis [Ibid., 123-125] of this:

A person condemns the others because he takes pleasure in “readiness to serve” (ταπεινοφροσύνῃ) and in “worship of angels” (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων). Both concepts take up the opponents’ catchwords. Consequently, ταπεινοφροσύνῃ here cannot mean humility, which in 3:12 is mentioned along with the other virtues of the Christians

³⁰“Again, in different words, the author refutes one of the claims the opponents voiced in the community: “let no one condemn you” (μηδεις ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύτω). The compound Greek verb translated with “to condemn” καταβραβεύειν, which is used here instead of “to pass judgment” (κρίνειν v 16), is rarely found in Greek literature. If the simple verb βραβεύειν means to award a prize won in a contest, then the compound verb καταβραβεύειν means “to award a prize unjustly” (τὸ ἀδίκως βραβεύειν), i.e., to decide against a person and rob him of a prize, to convict him, to condemn him. In the dependent participial clauses the grounds are briefly indicated on which these people base such judgments.” [Lohse, *Op. Cit.*, 120]

³¹The translation patterns tend to play off the derivative idea of condemning as a simpler way to get at the idea. But others try creatively to get at the point of the metaphor. Only a few signal the metaphorical background of καταβραβεύτω by including words such as prize or reward in their translation:

“Let no one condemn you” - LEB; “Don’t let anyone condemn you” - NLT; “Let no one keep defrauding you” - NASB; “Let no man beguile you” - KJV; “Let no man rob you of your prize” - ASV; “Don’t let anyone...rob you of the prize” - CEB; “Don’t be cheated by people” - CEV; “Let no one disqualify you” - ESV, HCSB; NCV; “Do not allow yourselves to be condemned by anyone” - GNT; “Nor let any man cheat you” - Phillips; “But don’t let people like that hold you back from winning the prize.” - NIV; “Do not let anyone...disqualify you” - NIV, TNIV; “Do not let anyone...disqualify you for the prize.” - NIV 1984, NIV UK; “Let no one cheat you of your reward,” - NKJV; “No man deceive you” - Wycliffe.

“Nadie os defraude de vuestro premio deleitándose” - BdA; “Y no permitáis que nadie os descalifique” - Castilian; “No dejen que los condenen esos” - DHH; “Nadie los defraude de su premio deleitándose” - NBLH; “No dejen que los condene ninguno” - NTV; “No dejen que les prive de esta realidad ninguno” - NVI; “No permitan que los condenen esos” - RVC; “Nadie os prive de vuestro premio” - R-V 1960; “Que nadie os prive de vuestro premio” - R-V 1995; “Nadie os prive de vuestro premio” - R-V Antiqua.

“Ne vous laissez pas condamner par ces gens” - BS; “ne vous ravisse à son gré le prix de la course” - Segond, NEG 1979; “ne vous prive de la victoire” - Segond 21.

“Lasst euch deshalb durch niemanden von eurem Ziel abbringen.” - HfA; “Laßt euch niemand das Ziel verrücken” - Luther 1545; “Lasst euch das Heil von niemand absprechen” - NGÜ; “Niemand soll euch um den Kampfpriest bringen” - Schlachter 1951; “Lasst nicht zu, dass euch irgendjemand um den Kampfpriest bringt” - Schlachter 200; “Lasst euch den Siegespreis von niemandem nehmen” - Luther 1984; “Niemand soll euch das Heil absprechen” - GNB; “Niemand soll euch verurteilen” - Menge-Bibel; “Niemand soll euch verachten” - EÜ; “Niemand soll euch den Siegespreis aberkennen” - ZB; “Um den Kampfpriest soll euch niemand bringen” - Elberfelder Bibel; “Lasst euch das Heil von niemand absprechen” - NGÜ; “dann lasst euch davon nicht ablenken” - NLB.

³²“Therefore, the reference to ‘readiness to serve’ (ταπεινοφροσύνῃ) and in ‘worship of angels’ (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων) as well as the relative clause ‘as he has had visions of them during the mystery rites’ (ἃ ἐόρακεν ἐμβατεύων) are quotes from the catchwords of the proponents of the ‘philosophy.’” [Lohse, *Ibid.*, 121]

(cf. also Phil 2:3; Eph 4:2). Rather it means the fulfillment of specific cultic regulations, to which v 23 also refers with the words ἐν ἑθελοθηρησικῇ καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ (in self-chosen worship and readiness to serve). Since both here and there the term "readiness to serve" occurs next to "worship," it does not describe a disposition. Rather, it is talking about cultic conduct. Of course, ταπεινοφροσύνῃ can, like the Hebrew תַּעֲנִית, mean fasting. The word, however, must in no way be restricted to this meaning. It describes the eagerness and docility with which a person fulfills the cultic ordinances. For the "worship of the angels" demands this. The angels determine the course of the cosmos and consequently man's life as well. Man submits to them insofar as he performs the prescribed cultic acts and fulfills the regulations laid down for him.

The short relative clause "as he has had visions of them during the mystery rites" (ὃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων) also deals with the cult which embraces "readiness to serve" and "worship of angels." These few words, to be sure, are so difficult to understand in their brevity that scholars have proposed various ways of altering the text. Since it did not seem proper for the adherents of that teaching to have had real visionary experiences, many manuscripts introduce a negation. In reality the adherents had seen nothing at all. Col, however, does not base its polemic on the untenable presupposition that it was impossible for pagans and heretics to experience ecstasies and visions. Supposing that the transmitted text could not possibly be correct, many exegetes have made ingenious conjectures. Yet all of these proposals are based on the idea that the short relative clause must be a polemic directed against the "philosophy." Actually, however, the clause is not polemical; it is a quotation. Therefore, there is no reason to depart from the transmitted text: ὃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων (as he has had visions of them during the mystery rites).

The verb ἐμβατεύειν means "to enter into," "to set foot upon"—a place, a city, a sanctuary or a country. This verb ἐμβατεύειν can then also mean "to approach something to investigate it." If this is the meaning in this passage too, then it could be explained: "What he had seen, he sought to investigate." Questioning, he strives to fathom what he has seen during ecstasy. This translation, however, is somewhat flat; it gains meaning only if one implies in the explanation the quest for knowledge as the motive which dominates the adherents of the "philosophy." It is noteworthy, however, that the same verb, ἐμβατεύειν, is found in the language of the mysteries. It describes the act of entering into the sanctuary in order to participate in the completion of the initiation rites and to experience the mysteries. In the excavations of the sanctuary of Apollo at Klaros a series of inscriptions was found that told how embassies came to the temple, underwent an initiation rite, and then received the oracle they had requested. In this description the word ἐμβατεύειν occurs often: "having been initiated, they entered" or "having received the mysteries, he entered" (μυηθέντες ἐνεβάτευσαν or παραλ[αβ]ῶν τὰ μυστήρι[α] ἐνεβάτευσεν). First the initiation takes place; only afterward is entrance into the inner sanctuary permitted and the message from the god received: "having been initiated and having entered, they consulted the oracle" (μυηθέντες καὶ ἐνβατεύσαντες ἐχρήσαντο). The word ἐμβατεύειν, "to enter into the sanctuary," accordingly describes one portion of the entire rite which, as a whole, is called: "to complete the mysteries" (ἐπιτελεῖν μυστήρια). Since the verb ἐμβατεύειν is frequently used in the inscriptions, it obviously is a fixed term in the language of the mysteries. In the circle of the "philosophy," so we must assume, cultic rites were performed, and the expression ὃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων must have referred to such rites. Since the catchword of the philosophy is quoted in a very curtailed form, it is not really clear to what the vision (ἑώρακεν) refers and whether ecstasy played a role in these mystery-like performances. Nevertheless, ἑώρακεν (he has had visions) probably indicates that the initiand, upon whom the initiation rites were performed, experienced the vision of cosmic correlations. With his senses, therefore, he experienced and performed the worship of the "elements of the universe." Despite the terse, abrupt way in which the words "readiness to serve," "worship of angels," and "as he has had visions of them during the mystery rites" follow one another, it is, nevertheless, evident that not only was a distinct teaching propagated, but also that cultic rites were actually performed in order to worship the "angels" and "elements of the universe."

These teachers claimed superiority because they were in touch with the angels who stood between them and God, and these angels were communicating to them special revelations through visions supposedly granted to these false teachers. With this mixture of pagan mystical religion and mystical Judaism of the first century, these teachers were pushing their agenda on the Colossians vigorously.

But Paul saw through the false claims of these individuals and exposed their phoney spirituality for what it truly was. He condemns these individuals on two bases: "puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, 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," εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοδὸς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὔξει τὴν αὔξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ. They claimed "readiness to serve" (ταπεινοφροσύνῃ); Paul exposed this as actually being "puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking" (εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοδὸς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ). The claim that God was speaking to them through angels; the reality was they were imagining this non-sense purely from their flesh. Sound familiar?

Also they had in reality ‘turned loose of the head,’ (καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν) that is, detached themselves from Christ. The fleshly motivation of worshipping angels was much preferable to them, than genuine submission to Christ. The image of ‘head’ (κεφαλὴν) underscores Christ as the source of all nourishment for the church. It is exclusively from Him that authentic growth and spiritual maturity takes place: “the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God,” (ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὖξει τὴν αὖξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ). With a dramatically beautiful picture of the human body, Paul stresses that the church only grows spiritually when it is properly connected to Christ with the strength of its “ligaments and sinews” (τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων). Genuine spiritual growth must only come from God: τὴν αὖξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ. The false teachers were promoting something completely disconnected from Christ. Thus its ‘growth’ was not spiritual or real. It was based upon fleshly accomplishments, and doomed to failure and religious ruin.

Again, modern Christianity continues to follow these false teachers of Colossae much too often. So many expressions of supposed Christianity today is based upon ‘fleshly accomplishments’ rather than upon genuine spiritual growth coming from God. In our day it takes on a variety of forms from pure ritual observance of religious ceremonies to noisy claims of ‘having the mind of Christ’ in spouting out visions with phoney ‘God talk’ language. From Paul’s evaluation here in vv. 16-19, one would have to conclude that all this in our world has no more legitimacy than did the teachings of the false teachers at Colossae. It represents a dangerous perversion of biblical Christianity both then and now.

2. What does the text mean to us today?

The areas of application of this passage are many, because so much of modern Christianity has turned to “fleshly” based rituals clothed in religious legalism. Many evangelicals readily blast the often empty religious formalism found in Roman Catholicism and some liturgical Protestant traditions. But in the same breath they become enslaved to their own legalism that insists on certain rituals as clear marks of spirituality, such as glossolalia, feverishly, highly emotionally charged worship etc. Unless one ‘experiences’ these things they are not in tune with God! -- so they tell us. “Baloney!” is Paul’s response to such heresy. These are flesh based efforts to win God’s approval, and thus imply inadequacy in the saving work of Christ on the cross. Even other Protestants who reduce their religion down to a formalism that involves little more than periodic church attendance come under the condemnation of this text of Paul. All of it, Paul declares, has turned loose of the Head of the church, Christ!

We constantly face the temptation to turn away from the highly nourishing spiritual food that God supplies through Christ. The urge for human accomplishment, that induces pride, creeps into our religious life as a dangerously deceptive legalism that demands adherence to prescribed rituals and patterns of behavior that look like ‘real religion’ but have nothing but hot air inside. Nothing but spiritual disaster awaits those who fall prey to such false teaching.

- 1) Does food play any role in achieving spirituality, according to Jesus and Paul?
- 2) What role can a religious calendar play in our world?
- 3) How can ‘humility’ be faked? How is it real, according to Paul here in our text?
- 4) How should Christians view angels?
- 5) What reveals true spirituality from phoney spirituality?