

PREFACE

There is a certain rhythm, or pattern to Chapter Two of Colossians:

Warning, followed by the **Basis for Resistance or Confidence**.

v4	I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.
v5b	good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ .
v6	as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him
v7	just as you were instructed
v8	See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception
v8b	rather than according to Christ [backing this up with details about the “fullness” of Christ in vv9-15]
v16	no one is to act as your judge
v17b	the substance belongs to Christ
v18	Let no one keep defrauding you
v19	hold fast to the head (i.e., Christ)
v20	do not submit yourself to worldly decrees
v3:1	keep seeking the things above

Paul repeatedly warns the Colossians about not giving into false teaching, and then follows that with the reason(s) they need not. They have every reason to remain in Christ; He is sufficient.

So after that long discourse in the previous passage [vv8-15], he naturally opens the next warning with “Therefore...”

Read Colossians 2:16-19.

w16-17

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day

Verse 16 is further evidence that the problems going on in Colossae were syncretistic—that is, they were a mixture of several belief systems. For example, the requirements based on food, festivals, or new moons, could refer to any number of religions or philosophic traditions—including Judaism. But the Jewish law said nothing about drink, so Paul could not have been referring just to that. However, *only* Judaism had a *shabbat* [shab-bawth], so he could not have been referring just to Gnosticism or asceticism.

things which are a mere shadow of what is to come

But what does Paul mean when he refers to these as being a “mere shadow” of what is to come? The writer of Hebrews helps us out.

Read Hebrews 8:3-6. [copy & shadow]

Read Hebrews 9:8-12. [symbol (illustration)]

Read Hebrews 10:1. [shadow & form (likeness, image)]

Remember the opening of the old Alfred Hitchcock television program, where all that was on the screen was a simple outline of the profile of the rotund director. Just a black outline, but the figure was immediately recognizable. Seeing that, the viewer knew right off whom it represented. Then the man himself stepped in from the right, and fit himself perfectly to the outline.

The outline was not the man himself, it just pointed us to the real thing.

From the beginning, Israel, especially, had missed the forest for the trees: God would give them a symbol, a copy, a *shadow* that He meant to point to the real thing, but Israel fixated on the symbol rather than the substance—the body.

For my favorite example, when the sojourning Israelites grumbled against God and Moses, the Lord sent fiery serpents among them as punishment. When they confessed their sin, Moses interceded with the Lord, and He graciously gave them a way out.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live."
Numbers 21:8

Now listen to what Israel took away from that.

Read 2 Kings 18:4.

The people of Judah had made a god out of that serpent, and had given it the name Nehushtan. So Hezekiah had it destroyed along with all the other idols. But the Lord had given that bronze serpent as a “shadow” of the substance—the real thing. Jesus Himself explains it.

Read John 3:14-15.

God had Moses use that serpent on a pole to get people accustomed to looking *up*, to something higher than themselves, for salvation. The bronze serpent was just a type for, a shadow of the true and substantive [bodily (*soma* = *bodily*)] Christ.

Paul is not saying to the Colossians that these “things” are bad, or worthless. As shadows they served a purpose in God’s plan. The law was not worthless; respecting the Sabbath day of rest was not (and is not) wrong. But these things were not an end in themselves—they were meant to point us to Christ. One does not have a *relationship* with regulations; one has a relationship with Christ Jesus.

Here is how Douglas Moo summarizes it:

Believers who belong to the new era through their incorporation into Christ...experience the reality to which the Old Testament and its law pointed.

w18-19

The original Greek text for vv18-19 is one long sentence, reflected in all our common translations but the NIV. The NIV breaks it up into three sentences for easier reading, without effectively changing the meaning. For our purposes we'll treat the two verses as one.

Read vv18-19.

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize

The opening of v18 is very much like the opening of v16, using similar imagery. In v16 Paul says that we should let no one judge us; in v18 he says that we should let no one defraud, or judge against [implied, unfairly condemn] us.

defrauding^{nasb}, **cheat**^{nkjv}, **beguile**^{kjv}, **disqualify**^{niv, esv} = *katabrabeuo* = from <G2596> (kata [against]) and <G1018> (brabeuo [umpire]) (in its original sense); **to award the prize against**, i.e. (figurative) **to defraud** (of salvation) :- beguile of reward.

Curtis Vaughan: The essential meaning is, "Let no one deny your claim to be Christians."

Most of us have run into this from time to time: pious judgments by self-righteous "Christians" who have assigned themselves the task of bringing everyone else up to their own lofty spiritual standards. They begin their reeducation with phrases such as,

"Well, I don't know if you are a Christian if you..." [participate in some heinous activity]

"A good Christian wouldn't..." [dance, go to movies, drink, smoke, etc.]

What follows this initial injunction are a number of descriptions of the false teachers; included in the descriptions are the methods by which they are trying to unfairly judge the Colossian believers. Let's not take them in order, but start with the root, or over-arching character trait of these self-appointed judges.

inflated [or conceited] without cause by his fleshly mind

KJVs: vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind

ESV: puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind

NIV: his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions

I think we get the point. Let's put it this way: *The guy doesn't know what he's talking about—and the little he does know he got from the world's system.*

by delighting in self-abasement

or "false humility"

I am reminded of what Jesus had to say about this in His Sermon on the Mount.

Read Matthew 6:16-18.

Now, of course, Jesus spoke of people who were probably earnest in their fasting, but also wanted to make a show of it [*“as the hypocrites”*]. In our text, the context [*not the word itself*] makes it pretty clear that the “humility” of the false teachers was in fact hypocritical. The NASB, with its translation “self-abasement” *hints* at the asceticism that we believe was being pushed in Colossae. That is, the punishment of the flesh based on the ascetic philosophy—part of Gnosticism—that said all matter, and especially the flesh, was evil.

The ESV cuts right to the chase, not hinting but stating explicitly, “insisting on asceticism.” The “insisting” in the ESV is an outlier translation; the word *thelo* can, technically, be so translated, but most interpreters see no grounds to conclude that the false teachers were *forcing* these habits on the Colossians. This passage, instead, is describing what the false teachers were enjoying doing themselves.

delighting in...the worship of the angels

Opinions on this vary, but I think the easiest and most probable interpretation of this is that it refers to the “hierarchy of spirit-beings” (Vaughan) that filled the universe—the aforementioned *aeons*. There may even be a reason these two characteristics—false humility and angel worship—are mentioned together.

Curtis Vaughan: The heretics probably insisted that their worship of angels rather than the supreme God was an expression of humility on their part. Lightfoot writes that “there was an officious parade of humility in selecting these lower beings as intercessors, rather than appealing directly to the throne of grace.”

taking his stand on visions he has seen,

This phrase is challenging; the Greek is obscure, and difficult to translate [*as I am told*].

Douglas Moo, while citing the alternate interpretations, comes down on the side of the NIV and ESV: “going on in detail about visions/what he has seen”. The verb could also be translated, as the NASB, “taking a stand,” or dwelling in. Literally *embateuo* means to “set foot upon.”

What is clearly incorrect is the insertion by the KJVs of the negative: “has *not* seen.” Virtually all commentators agree this should not be there—probably erroneously entered by a scribe in the manuscripts used by the KJVs. Even so, we could probably conclude from the context that these miscreants were certainly *embellishing* their prowess at visionary insight. As one scholar writes,

“If, as we may easily imagine, these pretenders were accustomed to say with an imposing and mysterious air, ‘I have seen, ah! I have seen,’—in relating alleged visions of heavenly things, the Colossians would understand the reference well enough” (Findlay)

If the Greek is obscure, the lesson for us is not. On what are *you* taking your stand? Where are you dwelling? Is your faith built on ecstatic visions, of feelings? Is it based on the logic of the world system? Or do you take your stand on Christ and His word?

and not holding fast to the head,

The last characteristic is so obvious as to be almost redundant. Of course these false teachers are not "holding fast" to Christ! If they ever *were* connected to Him, their hold is slipping dangerously. Some may even have abandoned Him all together. But even if they were true believers, they, as Douglas Moo writes, "had lost contact with the only effective source of spiritual growth."

And v19 concludes with the reason this connection is so important.

...from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

After Christ Jesus Himself and God's written word, each individual believer grows and matures spiritually by being part of the body of Christ as a whole: the church. As members of that body we hold each other together, just as the "joints and ligaments (bonds)" hold together the various parts of the human body.

And it all comes from God.