

Colossians Study 3: Chapter 2

Introduction

In this chapter, Paul comes to grips with the heart of the problem in the Colossian church. Whilst he is not specific about the problem, he leaves no doubt about the cure. We have to *read between the lines* to try to understand what the problem really is. In addressing the problem this way, Paul provides a pattern for how we address all similar problems – not just the one in Colosse.

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Homework and preparation for next week:

Read chapter 3 in preparation for next week.

Read the notes as a review of the study

- *Think through what are some things that “men” have added to the true worship of God. How have these things been “blended” into christianity? Where have these things taken the churches that have embraced them?*
- *Paul describes the Law as having “been nailed to the cross”. What other descriptions are given in the New Testament to show that it is no longer in effect?*

Notes for study 3: Chapter 2

Introduction

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Body of the Study

Paul's concern for them

Many of the Colossians did not know Paul personally – although at least some of them did. However, his concern for them comes through very strongly. “...*For I want you to know how greatly I have agonized for you...*” (2:1 McCord). Whilst some of the apparent criticism in the letter might be read wrongly, Paul’s motives (as always) were not selfish, but were directed to assisting them “...*I am trying very hard to help you...*” (2:1 ICB).

His address to those “...*who have not seen my face in the flesh...*” (2:1) may well be directed as a counter towards the Judaisers. From a study of 2nd Corinthians, it is obvious that the Judaisers had done much to attempt to discredit Paul. He responds that the Corinthians knew him, and should have known better than to listen to those attacking him. Later (in this chapter, Col 2) Paul discusses some issues that are clearly Jewish, and were apparently being attempted to be blended with christianity. The problem in Colosse is that many of the brethren didn’t know Paul – so, how would they react to such a persuasive attack against him as was so successful at Corinth? We can begin to understand Paul’s concern.

Not surprisingly, the problem that had arisen in Colosse also seems to have sprung up in Laodicea, for Paul’s deep concern is for both congregations. The NIV says “...*for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally...*” (2:1 NIV) which suggests that his concern was wider than just the two local congregations under discussion.

Conflicts had torn the Corinthian church apart. In contrast, Paul wanted the Colossians to be strongly knit together “...*that their hearts may be encouraged, united in love...*” (2:2 McCord). “...*so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding...*” “...*in order that they may know the mystery of God...*” (2:2 NIV). Notice how Paul constructs the arguments here:

United	<u><i>so that</i></u>
Complete understanding	<u><i>in order that</i></u>
Know God’s mystery	

We can’t know and understand God’s mystery, – which he tells us is “...*namely, Christ...*” – unless we have properly understood God’s revelation. [A proper understanding better describes the idea here, as none of us can have a complete and perfect understanding in this life]. In order for us to have that understanding, we must be united together. To put the argument simply, if we are not united together, then we really haven’t understood Christ at all!!!!

To finish off, Paul reminds them that in Christ “...*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge...*” (2:3 NKJV).

First Warning

Paul gives the Colossians a warning – which appears to be against the Judaisers, lest they come and try to tear them away from the pure doctrine of Christ “...with persuasive words...” (2:4)

However, the warning is equally applicable to those who would persuade them to worship angels, or to introduce anything else. Paul was not an idle bystander to the things that were going on. He felt the weight of these things on his shoulders with his “...deep concern for all the churches...” (2 Cor 11:28). The Colossians could rest assured that he was equally concerned about them “...For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit...” (2:5 NKJV). Paul’s concern for them meant sharing in their excitement as they grew spiritually “...rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ...” (2:5 NKJV).

He provides several metaphors, which typify our spiritual growth:

1. *Walk in Him* 2:6
2. A tree which is well established and well *rooted* 2:7
3. A building which is *built up and established* 2:7

Paul’s message is clear. They need to be unshakeable and unmovable in their faith, but it needs to be a *progressive* faith – one characterised by our *walk* with Christ.

Second warning

The second warning is also clear. They could be “...cheated through philosophy and empty deceit...” (2:8). We can begin to gain some idea as to what the problem is in Colosse. The introduction (in fact *blending*) of philosophy with pure christianity results in our being cheated of our eternal inheritance!

It is also clear where this problem came from “...according to the traditions of men, worldly elements, and not according to Christ...” (2:8). These things did not originate with Christ, and so have no part in the christian religion. There is a valuable lesson here for us. We must not add to the New Testament teachings, as the Colossians (apparently) were trying to do. If we cannot find bible authority for everything that we do in our practice of christianity, then we are *empty, deceitful, and practicing the traditions of men*, in just the same way as the Colossians were.

Christ is the remedy

Whilst Paul has provided only some hints regarding the problem, there is no doubt about the solution! We need to be completely united with Christ, “...For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form...” (2:9). When we understand Jesus, we understand God. The disciples spent three years with Jesus, and at the end they still didn’t get it. Jesus says to them “...If you have known me, then you have known my Father also...” (Jn 14:7-11).

Christ’s deity is revealed, as it is in Jn 1:1-14. “...The word was with God and the word was God...all things were made by Him...without Him nothing has been created...”

Being “...in Christ...” makes us *right with God*. Paul describes it as *Justified* in the Roman letter. Here he says we are “...complete in Him...” (2:10 NKJV). We don’t need anything else, as we are already complete! The idea that angels, or Judaisers, or anyone else can add anything to the complete and perfect sacrifice of Christ is just nonsense!

Christ’s exalted position is further brought out as Paul describes Him as “...the head of all principality and power...” (2:10 NKJV). The angels (whom we shall assume the Colossians were worshipping) live in a *spiritual realm*, and have a lot more power than we humans. However Christ is far and above all of them – so why would we want to forsake Christ? [We should note that the Colossians weren’t actually forsaking Christ, but had blended – synchronised – the worship of angels along with worshipping Christ. The problem was that there is no authority for

worshipping angels, and to *assume* that authority just because it seems like a good idea to us, is to forsake the clear commandment and “Thus says the Lord” that we do have. When we add anything to God’s commandments, we have gone beyond what is written, and have substituted our own authority instead of His.]

How did we get “in Him”?

Paul has already said that we are *complete in Him* (2:10), and he now directs us to just how it happens that we have become His. He reminds us of the new birth. The Jewish male was recognised as being Jewish through the rite of circumcision. It was a covenant relationship that was instituted with Abraham (Gen 17). The Judaisers made much ado about the Gentiles becoming christians, but not having been circumcised. The apostles made a decree that it was not necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised (Acts 15:22-29), but the Judaisers were insisting on it.

Under the new covenant, it is not the act of physical circumcision that puts us into a covenant relationship with God – but rather a spiritual act of circumcision “...*the circumcision made without hands...*” (2:11) which occurs when we put off “...*the body of the sins of the flesh...*” (2:11). Paul here is describing the action of the new birth, as he does in Romans 6:1-11.

He makes it abundantly clear (just as he does in Rom 6) that this process comes about when we are “...*buried with Him in baptism...*” (2:12 NKJV). The symbolism is clear:

Christ	Us	Symbol
Died	Die to sin	Faith, Repentance, Confession
Buried	Buried with Him	Baptism
Resurrection	Raised to newness of life	Our christian life

The new birth contrasts to our former lives. We had no hope, and were without God in the world, but now we “...*have been made alive together with Him, having all our sins forgiven...*” (2:13)

As a further symbol to the Jews, (and the Judaisers), Paul reminds us that on the cross, Jesus took away the Old Testament Law, which was symbolised by “...*the handwriting of requirements that was against us, was contrary to us...*” (2:14 NKJV). The Law became of no effect at the cross “...*being nailed to His cross...*” (2:14). The Law was in full effect until the cross, and at that time it was replaced by the Law of Christ. The Hebrew writer describes His Law as a *Testament which comes into effect when the testator dies* (Heb 9:16-17). Jesus’ new covenant was revealed with His teaching in the Gospels, and came into effect when He died. [Incidentally, we see here a very simple answer to the question as to whether what is written in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John before the cross is Old Testament teaching or New Testament teaching. Some people are teaching that it was Jesus finally bringing the Jews to account, and as such He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. Much more can be said about this, but the Hebrew writer’s description should be enough to bring the matter to an irrefutable end.]

Jesus’ triumph over all things

Jesus showed His power over all things through the events of Calvary (His arrest, trials, sentencing, crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection). At His arrest, He could have called for ten legions of angels (10,000) to come and protect Him, but He chose to suffer to bring man back to God. Pilate had the power to give sentence, but Jesus reminded him that it was only because God allowed him to have that power (Jn 19:11). The two thieves on the other crosses had to have their legs broken to hasten their death, but Jesus chose when to die. But His final show of power was in the resurrection, for “...*it was not possible that He could be held by death...*” (Acts 2:24). Paul says “...*having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross...*” (2:15 NIV)

Since Christ made such a commanding show of power and strength, there are implications for us. In particular, Christ showed His power in completing – fulfilling – the Old Testament scriptures “...*I have not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it...*” (Mt 5:17)

As a consequence, the Old Testament Law now has ended, so what purpose would there be in trying to re-introduce things from the Law back into the New Covenant (Testament)? This clearly is directed towards the Judaisers “...*Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day...*” (2:16 NIV). The Judaisers were insisting on the Gentiles keeping things from the Old Testament as a part of a system of Law. Rather than going back to the Old Law, it actually foreshadowed the New Covenant “...*These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ...*” (2:17 NIV)

Our reward in Christ

In verse 18, Paul gives us the strongest hint as to some of the problems in Colosse, when he specifically mentions the worship of angels. “...*Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly minds...*” (2:18 NKJV)

By the context, we can see that some people had been teaching that we ought to worship angels. We don't know whether this was the Judaisers or others. Their actions are described as *false humility*, and Paul says (in essence) that *they don't know what they are talking about, since they are dealing in realms that they haven't seen!* They are *vainly puffed up* which suggests that they were boasting about their supposed superior position of thought, and their ability to “reason” (?) these things out.

The end of these things is clear. It is a denial of the authority of Christ and God. When we do anything for which we have no scriptural authority, we are saying that our own authorisation is sufficient, and overwrites what Christ has said (or not said). We cannot be *in Christ* and then not subject ourselves to His power and authority. If we do subvert God's authority, then we cannot expect to receive the reward – clearly a reference to our eternal inheritance.

Paul says that these teachers (and the Colossians if they went along with them) were “...*not holding fast to the Head...*” (2:19 NKJV).

The church as a living body

The New Testament church is an organism rather than an organisation. In fact, we find no organisation higher than the local congregation. The apostles were authoritative in teaching, but did not exercise any authority in the governance of the church (with the possible exception of the early days of the church in Jerusalem).

Paul addresses the functionality of the local congregation – how it works together in several of his letters. In 1 Cor 12, and Rom 12 the church is likened to a human body with all of the members having a part to play in the working of the whole. He uses exactly that analogy here also. From Christ “...*all of the body nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase which is from God...*” (2:19 NKJV).

In the “parallel” passage from Ephesians, he says you are “...*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.* ²¹ *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.* ²² *And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit...*” (Eph 2:20-22 NIV)

The point is of course, that we all have a part to play in this *living organism*. We all have to help one another, and support one another. We cannot be divided. It comes right back to the unity issue (vs 2). The church cannot be divided on this issue – it has to be resolved!

Paul's call to action

Paul has pushed them to the point of needing to resolve the issue, and now leads them to what they need to do. Note that he doesn't "tell them" but rather asks a question that causes them to think through and work out the answer for themselves. "...*If you died with Christ...why do you subject yourselves to regulations – "do not touch, do not taste, do not handle"..."*" (2:20-21 NKJV).

In becoming Christians, we underwent the new birth, and died with Christ in baptism (2:12). Paul has also pointed out the Old Law (and the things that went with it) were nailed to the cross (2:14).

The heretics in Colosse were subjecting themselves to an outdated Law – which had ordinances requiring ceremonial washing, and other handling requirements. The Jews were regarded as unclean through contact with things such as dead bodies, or even Gentiles! And of course, there was the unclean meat (pig for example) that they could not even taste.

When the Old Law was taken away, all of these requirements also passed away. To re-introduce them is "...*in accordance with the commandments and doctrines of men..."*" (2:22).

In summary and conclusion Paul says "...*Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence..."*" (2:23 NIV)