

# PAUL'S CHRIST-CENTERED APPEAL!

## (COLOSSIANS 2:14-17)

### Introduction

Paul is unable to be with the new Colossians believers. Therefore, he is writing to them letters on behalf of Timothy and himself. As chapter 2 begins, their burden switches from individual concerns to corporate or church issues.

When we arrive at verse 4 there is an abrupt change in the word flow by: "I say." This expression discloses for the first time their focused worry to threatening issues related to that group.

- *"And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words"* (Colossians 2:4).
- The apostle had faced similar deceptive teachings with the Corinthians (I Corinthians 1:10), the Galatians (Galatians 1:6) and the Thessalonians (I Thessalonians 2:1).<sup>1</sup>
- What they are now doing is conveying a pastoral warning – "you run a serious risk if ..."

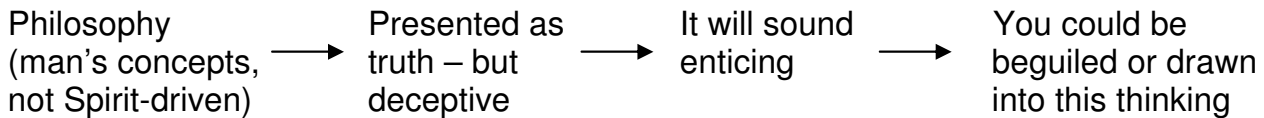
This unique passage records behavior of Jewish apologists who tenaciously want to mix their system with budding Christianity.

- There is a demarcation between the past and the new.
- He continued:
  - *"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ"* (Colossians 2:8).
- The challenges are given in "future tense."
- "Because of experience elsewhere, this could happen to you."
- False Jewish teachers were divisive toward this new movement. Paul had been very directive with the Thessalonian church:
  - *"Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us"* (II Thessalonians 3:6).
- This activism is at variance with the Christian teachings they were now converted to.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn, James D. G.; *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 133.

Outline of the issues:



Throughout the passage, Paul upholds the beautiful work that Christ accomplished for each one.

- “God would make known [to you] what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).
- He now becomes directive with these believers because the wonders of the Cross may be spoiled.

In Galatia, the challenge to the believers was not heathenizing but Judaizing. Attempts to graft Judaism into the root stock of Christianity was successful there and had actually matured to Paul's great dismay.

- “Even so we, when we were children, were in **bondage under the elements** of the world: ... But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the **weak and beggarly elements**, whereunto ye desire again to be in **bondage?**” (Galatians 4:3, 9).
- Paul, a Jew, then warns against Judaism.
- The issues are so specious that he notes you might be “carried away captive” (enslaved) (Colossians 2:8a) by that teaching.

What rudiments (*stoicheia*) might captivate their minds? Fascination with the “sacred” Jewish calendar. “You observe days, and months and seasons, and years” (Galatians 4:10). This will again be later inferred in Colossians 2:16!

- Don't identify with a pre-Christian religious experience.
- That would be spiritual regression.
- There is a close association between these Judaizing “captivating-custodian” concepts (2:8) and the keeping of Jewish festivals<sup>2</sup> when specific issues that the apostles describe are combined between Galatians and Colossians.

Judaism was a “shadow.” Its imagery was dull and not vivid. Christianity was the real byproduct of that past. Within the incredible message of the Cross one can now “bathe in beautiful light” (Colossians 1:12).

- The Judaizers claimed a “higher knowledge.”
- They preached the “ideal religious system.”
- But their understanding was portentous to spiritual growth.

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<sup>2</sup> Dunn, *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

- The “shadow” was buried in “mysticism.”<sup>3</sup>
- They had “fine-sounding” words without substance.<sup>4</sup>
- They acted much like the Pharisees (Acts 15:5).<sup>5</sup>

Centered within this warning narrative, the divine nature of Jesus is noted:

- “*For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily*” (Colossians 2:9).
- Christ is to be lifted up! This is where your focus should be.
- Dispense with the rites and ceremonies of the past.

“You don’t need all those ordinances and soon to be announced, ‘laws of Moses.’” “You are complete in Him (Jesus Christ).”

- Don’t be seduced by these elements that Paul now calls the “philosophy” of Judaism.
- Don’t reject the simplicity of faith in Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

### **Christ Really Did This**

In this creative portrayal of what Christ has done, Paul makes the simple statement, after talking negatively about anti-Christian elements: “*God ... has [even] forgiven all your trespasses*” (2:13). He is a “positive.” He’s working for you!

- “*In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace*” (Ephesians 1:7).

With all this as our foundation, the apostle moves into another theological realm. In addition to your sins being forgiven – God also has done something else wonderful for you:

- He has “*blotted out the handwriting which was against us*” (Colossians 2:14) – “wiped it away.” You no longer need to identify with these regulations.
- God has “wiped away” many things. In John’s apocalyptic book, twice he notes that tears will be “wiped away” forever (Revelation 7:17, 21:4). Luke urges everyone to repent and be converted that our sins may “*be blotted out*” (Acts 3:19) – same words.
- Here a handwritten document called “ordinances” is “blotted out.”
- How were they “against us”?

<sup>3</sup> John Eadie, LL.D., D.D.; A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, pp. 158-177. [http://openlibrary.org/b/OL23289672M/commentary\\_on\\_the\\_greek\\_text\\_of\\_the\\_epistle\\_of\\_Paul\\_to\\_the\\_Colossians](http://openlibrary.org/b/OL23289672M/commentary_on_the_greek_text_of_the_epistle_of_Paul_to_the_Colossians). Go to right-hand yellow box, click on “view” or “download.” Then go to the noted pages.

<sup>4</sup> Deterding, Paul E., *Concordia Commentary on Colossians*, (Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, MO), p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce, F. F.; *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (William B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

The **Decalogue** defined holiness, showing that sin was at variance with it. The ceremonial laws or ordinances gave instruction in how to apply those moral laws to the Jewish theocracy and what to do when they were broken. They showed what the chargeable offences were and their penalties<sup>7</sup> or purification rites. This system has now ceased. The Christian faith brings freedom from these oppressive rites.

There are many “interpretations” and “opinions” as to what these Greek words mean. If it is only an “unpaid debt,” as the name suggests to some expositors, it creates an awkward thought to what follows.

- We can find helpful counsel elsewhere.
- *“Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace”* (Ephesians 2:15). The ordinances were oppressive reminders of the peace that now comes from Jesus (who is restoring and giving us freedom).
- Christ abolished the Mosaic laws by His death (the “law of commandments” – Deuteronomy 31:24-26).
- These “ordinances” (*dogasin*) were part of the ceremonial system.

We can go into theological depths regarding these ordinances – but, contextually, Paul is pushing his concerns related to the Judaizer elements that were tainting other Christian communities. He didn’t like it and wanted the Colossians to resist that pressure. Expositor White elaborates:

“There is a law which was abolished, which Christ ‘took out of the way, nailing it to His cross.’ Paul calls it ‘the law of commandments contained in ordinances.’ This ceremonial law, given by God through Moses, with its sacrifices and ordinances, was to be binding upon the Hebrews until type met antitype in the death of Christ as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. Then all the sacrificial offerings and services **were to be abolished**. Paul and the other apostles laboured to show this, and resolutely withstood those Judaizing teachers who declared that Christians ought to observe the ceremonial law.”<sup>8</sup>

Paul is also putting the Colossians on notice that those ordinances were abolished. It would be the height of folly for others to reenact them or for you to observe them. “Whatever these ordinances are, they belong to an obsolete economy and are no longer of any obligation, for they were on the handwriting that was wiped out at the Cross.”<sup>9</sup>

Paul pushes the issue deeper:

- *“Having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it”* (Colossians 2:15; cf. Luke 11:22).
- As Christ’s death vanquishes Satan’s power and kingdom, so it also subjugated those ordinances (Ephesians 2:2).

<sup>7</sup> Thayer Lexicon on “handwriting.”

<sup>8</sup> White, Ellen G.; *The Bible Echo*, April 16, 1864 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> Eadie, *Op. cit.*, p. 159.

- The language of “triumphing over them” is in a military sense. It was a victory over types and rites.
- Those Mosaic rituals and periodic feasts are abrogated by a single death. Continued observances are called “mischievous teachings.”<sup>10</sup>

That “forgiveness of sin,” so graphically given (vs 13), came with Christ’s death on the Cross. The Levitical law required yearly rites to accomplish that. It is now done forever. Thus:

- The moral law is binding.
  - But the Mosaic Law has terminated.
    - Its power to punish
    - Its authoritative legislation
- } Are gone

Paul is appealing to the Colossian Church: “Don’t let the ritual law, which exhibits the condemning power of the whole law, be practiced by you. It has been formally and fully abrogated.”<sup>11</sup>

Christ did much to rescue man. Now, Paul, in impassioned language moves to a summation plea.

### **What I Want *Man* (the Colossians) to Fully Understand**

The substance of Paul’s letter to this point addresses a threat to the meaning of the gospel, an adulteration of truth and marginalization of the distinction between the Jewish theocracy and the burgeoning community of saints washed in the blood of the Lamb! The demarcation between the two was a line Paul had stepped over. There was to be no going back. The Aaronic leaders were replaced by the Melchizedkian priesthood of believers. The Judaizing of Christianity was seen as an element of pollution. The new believer was no longer required to be a liturgical pawn. Christ would actually come into the heart and transform the individual into a living reality of His very nature (Colossians 1:27) “*that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus*” (1:28).

Paul, a leader of one dispensation, is now a key leader in the next. He knows both well. He has defended both passionately. The first with violence and physical force, the second with Spirit-filled words: *Won’t you listen?*

Therefore, as a concluding thought: “Do not let anyone pass judgment on you.” That permissive concept was actually built into many of the ordinances. This begins an impressive climax to his pleas. Don’t let anyone criticize or condemn you regarding:

- Food, drink
- Holy days, new moons or sabbaths

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

Don't let anyone test your piety by such a criterion.<sup>12</sup>

Within the Jewish Christian community were lingering practices that linked their faithfulness to God as covenant people. They did not understand that a great transition in man's relationship to Him had occurred. The identity with "saving acts" had been replaced by "saving grace." The food, celebration rites and laws were not inherently evil. But they were given salvic merit. That detracted from Christ, and Paul was seeking their clarity of understanding.

This was no small task. Dunn eloquently addresses this:

"According to Acts it was precisely at this point that the barrier had to be broken down in the case of Cornelius. Peter's response to the vision in Joppa speaks for itself: 'No, Lord! For I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean' (Acts 10:14). And the subsequent point of criticism leveled against him is that he had eaten with uncircumcised men (Acts 11:3). So also in Galatians, even after and despite the agreement that Gentile believers need not be circumcised (Gal. 2:1-10), the issue of what one could eat and with whom resulted in a much more damaging confrontation and split (Gal. 2:11-14). In 1 Corinthians the issue of food offered to idols betrays the same essentially Jewish fear of idolatry (1 Corinthians 8–10, where ... appears at 8:4). And in Romans Paul felt it necessary to devote the major part of his paraenesis to the problem. Of how local churches could live in mutual respect where there were different attitudes to and practice regarding clean and unclean food."<sup>13</sup> (Romans 14).

Don't let others criticize you for avoiding "meat or drink" rites. The issue of clean or unclean food or drink is not addressed. It alludes directly to ordinances that had been associated with sacrifices and offerings. Paul revisits this to make sure it is understood.

- *"Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost thus signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation. But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us"* (Hebrews 9:6-12).
- *"These are the feasts of the LORD, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD, a burnt offering, and a meat offering, a sacrifice, and drink offerings, every thing upon his day"* (Leviticus 23:37).
- The issue **is** ceremonial food and drink – don't be deceived by getting involved.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Dunn, *Op. cit.*, p. 172.

The ordinances were against us, then taken out of the way, nailing them to the Cross. Don't let anyone try to revert you back to those ceremonies.

This is where a great principle of religious and cultural discernment between the past and the now emerges. Progressive revelation of truth is inherent within the Bible. If it weren't, the New Testament would have been unnecessary. To the devout and scrupulous "doers of the law" comes a warning. In their zeal came a tendency to pass judgment on others.

- *"Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him"* (Romans 14:3).
- *"For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost"* (Romans 14:17).
- *"For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed"* (John 6:55). Everything is complete in Him.

Many insist on a ceremonial lifestyle, thinking it an expression of holiness and essential to salvation. That conviction has the risk of losing the deeper issues of holiness and of condemning others. Thus, the Jewish loyalist – "the Judaizers" – who claimed to be "Christian Jews" became a thorn to the purity of the church.

- This actually portrayed an "expansion" and redefinition of Judaism.
- Paul says, "No." This is not where we should be going.

This is why Paul began the letter with actually very stern and tough language – specifically regarding the teaching of these Jewish traditions.

- Don't be beguiled, enticed by their words.
- Beware of their philosophy, vain deceit.

That is stern – pointed – targeted. In looking back at these verses, following such practices is nefarious! The assumption that the beauty and power of the Cross was "Jewish" is implied through their pernicious *requirements* being imposed on the Colossian church. Paul doesn't stop there:

Don't be criticized relative to a holy day (festival), a new moon (tied to the lunar cycle and Trumpets) and the sabbaths (plural – though *by itself* could represent the seventh day also) (Colossians 2:16).

- By themselves, one might justify a community celebration, family event or non-binding tradition.
- But the three together puts beyond dispute that Paul is referring to the annual festivals of the Jewish religion (I Chronicles 23:31; II Chronicles 2:3, 31:3; Nehemiah 10:33; Isaiah 1:13-14; 1 Maccabees 10:34, Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:11).

*"But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You*

are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (Galatians 4:9-11 – NIV).

- These things belong to an “obsolete system,” which has now “decayed and waxed old.”
- Christianity inculcates no such periodic holidays.<sup>14</sup>

Paul will later reaffirm that salvation comes through Christ (Colossians 2:19, 23). That is our focus. This is a vital clarion call. The remnant/saints described in Revelation 12:17 and 14:12 have the “faith of Jesus” and the “testimony of Jesus.” A Christological center to one’s faith is tied to the group who will stand with the Lamb on Mt. Zion. Detracting practices, calendars and traditions alter the fabric of the robe of His righteousness! The authority of the Christian faith does not come from these activities. It is centered in Jesus, the cross and His blood.

One may question, “What is wrong with these things.” That is answered by Paul in this chapter in graphic language. It is not subject to debate or to speculation. He charges the teachings as an abomination (Colossians 2:20-22). That’s serious. Now – Paul explains “why” in more detail:

### **Jewish Representation (Type) – Messianic Representative (Antitype)**

The practices that the apostle addressed are a “shadow of things to come” (Colossians 2:17).

- Many assume that this still anticipates a fulfillment beyond Paul. But:
- It is a participle, thus, a technical expression.
- It refers to the Messiah that has already come.
- Hence, Jesus could call John the Baptist “Elijah, who is going to come” (Matthew 11:14).<sup>15</sup>

All the practices and rituals addressed previously in this chapter are shadows of “things to come.” They anticipated something real – tangible – of greater value. What was that? The “body of Christ.”

- The shadow is the intended likeness of the substance.
- Christianity was not fashioned to resemble Judaism; Judaism was fashioned to resemble Christianity.
- The Mosaic economy was a shadow (partially discernable) image of Christianity’s future existence.

The shadow in itself is nothing. It is empty and indistinct. The type was wanting in spiritual power. Its only value was its connection with the substance to come.<sup>16</sup>

- Now Paul concludes: “Why listen to anyone urging the observances of these dietary laws, feast keeping, circumcision, etc.? They want a shadow and not a substance.”

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<sup>14</sup> Eadie, *Op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> Deterding, *Op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Eadie, *Op. cit.*, p. 176.



That would impede divine progress. It would stifle devotion and degrade obedience into a service of trifles.

- Don't be influenced by such pretenses.
- Don't submit to such teachings.
- The real is supplanted by the ritual.

“They failed to discern the veiled mystery of godliness; Christ Jesus remained veiled to them. The truth, the life, the heart of all their service, was discarded. They held, and still hold, the mere husks, the shadows, the figures symbolizing the true. A figure for the time appointed, that they might discern the true, became so perverted by their own inventions, that their eyes were blinded. They did not realize that type met antitype in the death of Jesus Christ. The greater their perversion of figures and symbols, the more confused their minds became, so that they could not see the perfect fulfillment of the Jewish economy, instituted and established by Christ, and pointing to Him as the substance. Meats and drinks and divers ordinances were multiplied until ceremonial religion constituted their only worship.

“In His teaching, Christ sought to educate and train the Jews to see the object of that which was to be abolished by the true offering of Himself, the living Sacrifice. ‘Go ye,’ said He, “and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice.’ He presented a pure character as of supreme importance. He dispensed with all pomp, demanding that faith that works by love and purifies the soul, as the only qualification required for the kingdom of heaven. He taught that true religion does not consist in forms or ceremonies, outward attractions or outward display. Christ would have taken these to Himself if they had been essential in the formation of a character after the divine similitude. But His citizenship, His divine authority, rested upon His own intrinsic merits. He, the Majesty of heaven, walked the earth, shrouded in the robe of humanity. All His attractions and triumphs were to be revealed in behalf of man, and were to testify to His living connection with God.

“Christ's prediction regarding the destruction of the temple was a lesson on the purification of religion, by making of none effect forms and ceremonies. He announced Himself greater than the temple, and stood forth proclaiming, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life.’ He was the one in whom all the Jewish ceremony and typical service was to find its fulfillment. He stood forth in the place of the temple; all the offices of the church centered in Him alone.

“In the past, Christ had been approached through forms and ceremonies, but now He was upon the earth, calling attention directly to Himself, presenting a spiritual priesthood, and placing the sinful human agent at the footstool of mercy.”<sup>17</sup>

We are invited to become part of that Melchizedekian priesthood. Paul's passionate concern to the Colossians is to call attention to Jesus and not to ordinances that were detracting from that experience.

#### **References – General:**

1. O'Brien, Peter T.; *Word Biblical Commentary – Colossians, Philemon* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN).

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<sup>17</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, pp. 397-399.

2. Gaebelin, Frank, E.; *The Expositor's Bible Commentary – Ephesians through Philemon*, vol. II (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI).

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