

“Let No One Judge You”: Col 2:16-17 in Exegetical Perspective

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Colossians 2:16-17 has been a bone of contention for scholars and theologians, resulting in a great variety of proposals for interpretation over the years.¹ This paper proposes to review the passage again, taking an exegetical approach to understanding the intent of the passage in its immediate and larger context. It should be noted at the outset that it is not the primary purpose of this study, as with many such studies of this passage, to argue the nature of the *sabbata* in 2:16, though we will address that issue somewhat in the course of the exegesis. The focus of this study is to try to address the question of what kinds of things no one should judge the readers with reference to, and why. The implications for theology and practice then are drawn out from the biblical exegesis of the passage in order to address the believer's proper relation to Christian standards and practices as it relates to this passage.

Paul's Purpose in the Epistle to the Colossians

In the first part of his epistle to the Colossians, Paul exalts the role and function of Jesus Christ above every other consideration (“all creation,” “all things”: 1:15-18) in order to establish the obligation of the believer to give Him first place in the life: “that in all things He may have the preeminence” (v. 18).² Paul continues to exalt Christ similarly as he moves through the subsequent discussion, showing how in Christ all the fullness of Deity dwells bodily (1:19; 2:9); how Christ has become the means of reconciliation and peace with God (1:20-22); and how God has made him (Paul) a steward and minister of the mystery of the gospel (1:23-29), which Paul defines as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27). In chap. 2 Paul

¹ There are too many to list here, but a number of the major studies will be referenced in the footnotes below at some appropriate point.

² All Scripture quotations in this paper are from the NKJV unless otherwise indicated.

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expresses his great desire that his readers in both Colossae and Laodicea attain to a full understanding of this mystery (2:1-2) and become established in their faith in Christ (v. 5), "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 3). Finally, Paul concludes this introduction with the imperative, "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving" (vv. 6-7).

However, Paul does not stop there. He knows that various deceptions will entice them with persuasive words (v. 4), and he warns against some very specific forms of deception: "Beware lest anyone cheat³ you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (v. 8). It is Christ that should form the center of their belief and practices, not philosophy, human tradition, or worldly principles, "for in Him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (vv. 9-10).

Much research has been conducted on the nature of the "heresy" which Paul opposes in Colossae. Yet until now there is no firm conclusion regarding this matter, making it difficult to draw conclusions based on the nature of the heresy.⁴ Charles Talbert, in his 2007 commentary, summarizes recent proposals under four basic camps, then concludes, "None of these four basic approaches commands a consensus at present. Questions remain."⁵ It is not necessary to know precisely the nature of the 'heresy' in order to understand Paul's purpose, which is to oppose any false form of religion that involves knowledge or works with true religion,

³ The Greek expression here indicates one who will be a spoiler, carrying people away as captives (ὁ σπυλαγωγῶν), the same concept which later appears in v. 15.

⁴ R. McL. Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, International Critical Commentary (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 44, concludes his survey of the literature on the Colossian heresy by saying, "From this survey it will be clear that there is still no consensus on this question, beyond the general recognition mentioned at the beginning, that there are both Jewish and 'Gnostic' elements present in the 'philosophy'." Then after further considering various proposals he adds on p. 61, "The very variety of these proposals prompts to caution: we are not yet in a position to affirm with confidence that we have finally identified the nature and origins of the Colossian 'heresy'."

⁵ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 209. The four camps are that the heresy is (1) a mystery religion mixed with gnostic and Jewish elements; (2) a Jewish problem, either critical of Gentile Christian lifestyle or practicing a mystical asceticism; (3) a Greek philosophy of some sort; or (4) a syncretism of some sort, generally thought to combine Jewish, pagan, and philosophical ideas (206-209).

namely, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.⁶

The Local Context of Colossians 2:16-17

In 2:11-15 Paul reminds his readers that they have been fully inducted into the body of Christ, the church (1:18), through baptism, which symbolized “putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,” a “circumcision made without hands” (2:11), and that by baptism they “were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him [Christ] from the dead” (v. 12). Further, he adds that although they, as Gentiles, had previously been “dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh,” they have been “made alive together with Him” and all their trespasses have been forgiven (v. 13).⁷ This entrance by Gentiles into the new covenant experience of belonging to the household of faith and receiving acceptance and forgiveness was made possible by Christ’s death on the cross, in which He “wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us” (v. 14).⁸ By the “handwriting of requirements [χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν] that was against us,” Paul makes reference to the Mosaic code⁹ that drew a distinction between the covenant people of God, who were considered ritually clean and holy if they kept the ritual law, and the people of the nations, who were deemed unclean and unholy, since they did not keep the ritual law, thus excluding the latter from the

⁶ We will analyze below the specifics of the various false forms of religion that Paul identifies in the passage. Whether they relate to Jewish or pagan forms of religion or philosophy, Paul takes the same approach to all of them. None of them have their foundation in Christ.

⁷ Careful comparison with Eph 2:11-19, a parallel passage, makes clear that Paul was addressing Gentiles: “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (vv. 11-13).

⁸ By comparison with Paul’s use of the first person plural in the parallel in Eph 2:14-18, it becomes evident that “us” here refers to both Jew and Gentile who were reconciled to God “in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity” and creating “one new man from the two, thus making peace” (vv. 15-16).

⁹ Some want to see this as referring also to the Ten Commandments, but these were not in any sense a handwritten document (χειρόγραφον), nor did they have to do with regulations or ordinances (τοῖς δόγμασιν), and they did not distinguish Jews from Gentiles and create a barrier of hostility between them by including the one group while excluding the other as unclean. The purported grammatical connection between the forgiveness of sins and making alive in v. 13 and the wiping out of the χειρόγραφον in v. 14 is not strong enough to require that the latter is a reference to the other. The participle can be a mere temporal participle. Besides, forgiveness of sins was not provided for by annulling the moral law but rather by paying the penalty of the law.

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congregation of Israel that worshiped God at His sanctuary.¹⁰ The forgiveness of sins was made possible also by Christ's death on the cross (v. 13), at which, "having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (v. 15).¹¹ These "principalities [ἀρχαί: rulerships] and powers [ἐξουσία: authorities]" are the same mentioned in Eph 6:12, namely, the powers of evil that dominate this present age and war against God and His people. Christ's victory over these powers at the cross gave Him the authority to take captives in His triumphal procession from among the spoils of the enemy (cf. Luke 11:21-22 par.; Isa 53:12; Eph 4:8; Heb 2:14-15).

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In 2:16-17 Paul concludes from this fact that his readers should let no one judge them in regard to those matters which pertain to the ritual law which, as has already been pointed out, was made void by Christ's sacrifice on the cross.¹² The ritual law consisted of types and ceremonies which foreshadowed the atoning work of Christ and had no more function after Christ came as the real Sacrifice, the Body to which the shadow points (v. 17). The book of Hebrews points to this same reality.

Hebrews 9 declares that the earthly tabernacle and its services was symbolic only, involving the offering of gifts and sacrifices it speaks of "a festival or a new moon or sabbaths." This has been one of the most misunderstood aspects of the passage.

The key to understanding this reference is unmistakably found in the OT texts to which it clearly alludes. Paul Giam has "which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience" (Heb 9:9). It was "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation" (v. 10). In fact,

¹⁰ This is clearly Paul's point in the parallel passage in Eph 2:11-22, in which he uses very similar language (τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν) to describe how the Gentiles "who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ" (v. 13), since Christ "has broken down the middle wall of division" (v. 14), "the enmity," namely, "the law of commandments contained in ordinances" (v. 15), so "making peace," "that he might reconcile them both [Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised (v. 11)] to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity" (vv. 15-16).

¹¹ Robert M. Royalty, "Dwelling on Visions: On the Nature of the So-called 'Colossian Heresy,'" *Biblica* 83 (2002): 355, says, "The language is primarily militaristic; θριαμβεύω suggests the triumphal procession of a Roman emperor and ἀπεκδύομαι means to disarm. Col 2, 9-15 climaxes with the militaristic image of God's defeat, through Christ, of all rulers and powers, earthly or heavenly. God's domination through Christ of the ἀρχαί [sic] καὶ ἐξουσία is a key notion in Colossians (Col 1,13.16; 2,10.15)."

¹² This is a summary statement that will be defended and justified below. One can see in this statement, however, that there is probable cause to understand that the opponents who would be doing the judging were likely, in part at least, of Jewish background, insisting, much like we see in Acts 15, that Gentile Christians practice the Jewish ritual law, among other things.

it was because of this inadequacy of the old ritual law to take away sins (10:4) that Christ, “the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death” provided “for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant” (9:15). “For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect” (10:1). The parallels between the language of Col 2:16-17 and that of Heb 9,10 are too clear to be mistaken regarding the meaning.¹³ Given the similar context, the food and drink—or eating and drinking (βρώσις καὶ πόσις)—mentioned in Col 2:16 should probably be understood as essentially the same food and drink (βρώμα καὶ πόμα) referred to in Heb 9:10.¹⁴ If so, they do not refer to the daily eating and drinking of Paul’s readers but to rituals involving food and drink that were associated with the old ritual law, “fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.”¹⁵ The “shadows of coming things” in Col 2:17 are the same sacrifices and rituals of the sanctuary which pertain to that ritual law which is “a shadow of the good things to come” in Heb 10:1.¹⁶ It remains only to determine to what Col 2:16 refers when done a fairly thorough study in this area for the purpose of trying to understand the nature of the sabbaths mentioned in Col 2:16.¹⁷ The present study has a broader interest in this reference, not to merely discuss the nature of the sabbaths (σαββάτων)¹⁸ but to understand

¹³ Paul Giem, “Sabbatōn in Col 2:16,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1981): 208-9, and H. Ross Cole, “The Christian and Time-Keeping in Colossians 2:16 and Galatians 4:10,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 39 (2001): 275-77, note some, though not all, of these parallels.

¹⁴ Interestingly, Giem does not seem to see this connection. He argues that “βρώσις καὶ πόσις is probably a gnostic rather than an OT phrase” (208). Norman H. Young, “Romans 14:5-6 and Colossians 2:16 in Social Context,” paper presented to the Biblical Research Institute Committee at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, October 22-23, 2007, 18, on the other hand, argues that within the context of Col 2:16 they refer to communal meals on festival days.

¹⁵ See Exod 29:40-41; Lev 23:18,37; Num 6:15,17; 15:4-7; 28:5,7-10,12-14, 24; 29:6,11, 16,18,19,21,22,24,25,27,28,30,31,33,34,37-39; 2 Kgs 16:13,15; Ezek 45:17; Joel 1:9,13; 2:14. These offerings generally involved eating the items which were offered. The priests ate from some of the offerings, and the people ate from other of the offerings. See Lev 10:12-19; Num 8:8-14; Deut 12:17-27; Ezek 42:13; 44:29.

¹⁶ Giem, 208, correctly observes that σκιά has “a pointing or foreshadowing function” in the context of Heb 8:5 and 10:1, “and there is no reason why in Col 2:17 σκιά should not be understood in the same way.” “In Heb 8:5 σκιά is parallel with ὑποδείγματι” (ibid.), where both refer to the OT sanctuary as “the copy and shadow of the heavenly things.”

¹⁷ Giem, 198-202. See also Young, 15-17.

¹⁸ Why Giem treats this as a singular noun rather than as the genitive plural that it is, he does not explain (Giem, 198), but Ron du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can't Be Found in Colossians 2:16* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2008), 35-36, attempts to explain that σαββάτα (from which σαββάτων derives) has been shown to be either singular (when taken over as a loanword from Aramaic) or plural (of σαββάτων), and he prefers to take it as singular, in agreement with ἑορτῆς and νεομηνίας. Ultimately, it may not make much difference, since the LXX of background texts uses the singular as

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the allusion that seems to be inherent in the whole list of things for which Paul's readers were not to allow others to judge them,¹⁹ then to understand the reference in the larger context of Paul's whole discussion in the epistle. Interestingly, the three elements found in Col 2:16 appear together in the same context—and in the same sequence—in Ezek 45:17:

"Then it shall be the prince's part to give burnt offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings, at the **feasts**, the **New Moons**, the **Sabbaths**, and at all the appointed seasons of the house of Israel."²⁰

It is clear from this passage that the feasts, new moons, and sabbaths were the times when these various offerings were to be made. It is interesting also that grain (food) and drink offerings are included along with burnt offerings, sin offerings, and peace offerings. The focus is on ritual offerings made on special days. In order to see that this is not just a coincidental arrangement of references to these elements from Col 2:16, we need to look at the broader evidence available. Gien observes that the most important parallel, the one after which most of the others are modeled, is Num 28-29. It is not feasible to quote the whole passage, but 28:9-10 presents the burnt offerings, grain offering, and drink offering for the (weekly) Sabbath; 28:11-15 presents the burnt offering, grain offering, drink offering, and sin offering for "the beginnings of your months," or new moon festivals (LXX: ἐν ταῖς νεομηνίαις); and 28:16–29:40 presents the burnt offerings, grain offerings, drink offerings, sin offerings, and peace offerings for the various annual festivals.

Following is a series of references to the same three elements, demonstrating the intentional relationship between them. Although they vary in the sequence in which they are mentioned, Young points out that

well as the plural.

¹⁹ The nature of the sabbaths themselves will be shown to be not essential to the larger discussion in light of the exegetical study of the verse as a whole and specifically of the OT backgrounds being alluded to here; therefore, this study does not attempt to discuss the nature of these days, though the OT backgrounds suggest that they refer to weekly sabbaths along with the daily, monthly, and annual ceremonies when burnt offerings were offered, as shown below. Cf. Gien, 206, 209, and Young, 17.

²⁰ Words in bold are my own emphasis to highlight the elements from Col 2:16. The LXX lists the offerings in Ezek 45:17 as τὰ ὀλοκαυτώματα καὶ αἱ θυσίαι καὶ αἱ σπονδαὶ ἔσονται ἐν ταῖς ἑορταῖς καὶ ἐν ταῖς νεομηνίαις καὶ ἐν τοῖς σαββάτοις καὶ ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἑορταῖς οἴκου Ἰσραὴλ. Du Preez, 63, argues that this passage is not relevant as a background to Col 2:16 because there is no clear calendar sequence here, since it begins with the daily, moves to the yearly, monthly, and weekly, then back to the yearly again. He also argues that here the festivals and new moons are plural, whereas they are singular in Col 2:16 (66), and also that Paul did not quote from Ezekiel in his epistles (102), so Ezek 45 cannot be background for Col 2:16. He is very uncomfortable with any purported background that ties into the weekly Sabbath.

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these variations have no significance relative to the meaning.²¹ It is important to note the explicit connection to the regular burnt offering in each of these except Hos 2:11.²²

Neh 10:32-33: Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the **Sabbaths**, the **New Moons**, and the set **feasts**; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.²³

Hos 2:11: I will also cause all her mirth to cease, / Her **feast days**, / Her **New Moons**, / Her **Sabbaths**— / All her appointed feasts.²⁴

1 Chr 23:30-31: And to stand every morning to thank and praise the LORD, and likewise at even; and at every presentation of a burnt offering to the LORD on the **Sabbaths** and on the **New Moons** and on the set **feasts**, by number according to the ordinance governing them, regularly before the LORD.²⁵

2 Chr 2:4: Behold, I am building a temple for the name of the LORD my God, to dedicate it to Him, to burn before Him sweet incense, for the continual showbread, for the burnt offerings morning and evening,

²¹Young, 16.

²²Contra du Preez, 106, I find implicit allusions in the context of Hos 2:11 to sacrifices and offerings. By way of contrast with what Israel should be doing on these days, as instructed in the other passages, she is committing spiritual adultery by burning incense to the Baal idols on the festival days (2:13) and offering raisin cakes to idols (3:1 NET). Therefore, they must live many days without sacrifice or sacred pillar, without ephod or teraphim (3:4). Afterward they will turn and seek the Lord their God (3:5). This is what God is referring to when He says in 2:11 that He “will put an end to all her celebrations: her annual religious festivals, monthly new moon celebrations, and weekly Sabbath festivities—all her appointed festivals” (NET). The parallel set of festival days also suggests that the same daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly days for celebration and offering of sacrifices is in view, even if the sequence is not always consistent. For du Preez to argue that “not even one” of the other texts “has been found to contain any such logical progression” as a calendar sequence, in either direction (66), does not match the evidence.

²³The LXX of v. 33 (2 Esdr 20:34) has (in part) εἰς ὀλοκαύτωμα τοῦ ἐνδελειχισμοῦ τῶν σαββάτων τῶν νομηνιῶν εἰς τὰς ἑορτὰς.

²⁴The LXX (Hos 2:13) has καὶ ἀποστρέψω πάσας τὰς εὐφροσύνας αὐτῆς ἑορτὰς αὐτῆς καὶ τὰς νομηνίας αὐτῆς καὶ τὰ σάββατα αὐτῆς καὶ πάσας τὰς πανηγύρεις αὐτῆς. Note how the three are summarized together as “all her appointed feasts” (πανηγύρεις: festal gatherings).

²⁵The LXX of v. 31 reads, καὶ ἐπὶ πάντων τῶν ἀναφερομένων ὀλοκαυτωμάτων τῷ κυρίῳ ἐν τοῖς σαββάτοις καὶ ἐν ταῖς νεομηνίαις καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἑορταῖς κατὰ ἀριθμὸν κατὰ τὴν κρίσιν ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς διὰ παντὸς τῷ κυρίῳ.

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on the **Sabbaths**, on the **New Moons**, and on the set **feasts** of the LORD our God. This is an ordinance forever to Israel.²⁶

2 Chr 8:12-13: Then Solomon offered burnt offerings to the LORD on the altar of the LORD which he had built before the vestibule, according to the daily rate, offering according to the commandment of Moses, for the **Sabbaths**, the **New Moons**, and the three appointed yearly **feasts**—the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles.²⁷

2 Chr 31:3: The king also appointed a portion of his possessions for the burnt offerings: for the morning and evening burnt offerings, the burnt offerings for the **Sabbaths** and the **New Moons** and the set **feasts**, as it is written in the Law of the LORD.²⁸

There are other passages as well, such as Isa 1:13-14,²⁹ which refer to these same elements. All of these parallel OT passages serve to provide a precedent for understanding Paul's use of the expression "a festival or a new moon or sabbaths" in Col 2:16 to be an obvious reference to the burnt offerings which were offered at weekly, monthly, and yearly celebrations, in addition to the daily burnt offerings which were offered in the temple according to the Mosaic ritual law. The concern is not with the festivals, new moon celebrations, or sabbaths *themselves* but with the ritual offerings which were offered on those days, the one thing that three all have in common when grouped in the same context.³⁰ The days and festivals

²⁶ The LXX of the last part of the verse (v. 3 in the LXX) reads, καὶ τοῦ ἀναφέρειν ὀλοκαυτώματα διὰ παντός τὸ πρωὶ καὶ τὸ δείλης καὶ ἐν τοῖς σαββάτοις καὶ ἐν ταῖς νομηνίαις καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἑορταῖς τοῦ κυρίου θεοῦ ἡμῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦτο ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραηλ.

²⁷ The LXX of v. 13 reads, καὶ κατὰ τὸν λόγον ἡμέρας ἐν ἡμέρᾳ τοῦ ἀναφέρειν κατὰ τὰς ἐντολὰς Μωσῆ ἐν τοῖς σαββάτοις καὶ ἐν τοῖς μηνῶν καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἑορταῖς τρεῖς καιροῦς τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ τῶν ἀζύμων καὶ ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ τῶν ἑβδομάδων καὶ ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ τῶν σκηνῶν. It is notable that the feasts are here identified as the three appointed yearly feasts, the pilgrim festivals which are then named. Also, in this text the LXX uses μηνῶν (months) instead of νομηνίαις (new moons), though there does not seem to be any significance to the difference.

²⁸ LXX: αἱ μερὶς τοῦ βασιλέως ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰς ὀλοκαυτώσεις τὴν πρωινὴν καὶ τὴν δειλινὴν καὶ ὀλοκαυτώσεις εἰς σάββατα καὶ εἰς τὰς νομηνίας καὶ εἰς τὰς ἑορτὰς τὰς γεγραμμένας ἐν τῷ νόμῳ κυρίου.

²⁹ Besides these passages, Giem, 200-6, and Young, 15-16, point to parallels also in the apocryphal and extrabiblical literature, such as 1 Esdr 5:51 LXX; 1 Macc 10:34; Jdt 8:6; 1 QM 2.4-6; Jub 6:34-38; etc., but several are not in the context of burnt offerings like the OT texts, though some are.

³⁰ This was also the conclusion of Giem, 206, 209. Du Preez, 63, 66, 106, contests this, asserting that Col 2:16 refers only to the days or festivals themselves, since no ritual activity is mentioned in the text. However, we have seen in note 22 above that sacrifices may be

themselves were not necessarily shadows of coming things—of Christ—but the ritual offerings made on those days certainly were. Others have pointed out that the weekly Sabbaths were memorials of creation (Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:11; 31:17; Mark 2:27) rather than shadows pointing forward to Christ, that they were not tied to the sanctuary ritual.³¹ The new moons likewise were celebrations not directly related to the sanctuary ritual and did not function as types or shadows of Christ and His sacrifice.³²

The food and drink, or eating and drinking, in the same context, clearly seem to refer to ceremonial eating and drinking in connection with the rituals, such as at the Passover meal.³³ This is made apparent by v. 17, which says that these things (ἄ) are a shadow of coming things,³⁴ whereas, the body (σῶμα) to which the shadow points is that of Christ.³⁵ When the reality came to which the shadow pointed, the old rituals were no longer necessary. That is why Paul counseled his readers to let no one judge them in regard to practice of these old rituals. The Jerusalem Council had already rendered a decision regarding these matters (Acts 15:19-29). The

implied, though not explicit, in the parallel passage he has cited from Hos 2:11, though he argues that they are not intended there either (106). I contend from the OT parallels that these are implicit, and the mention of these things as “a shadow [or foreshadowing] of things to come,” referring to Christ, makes this reasonably evident. The weekly Sabbath was never viewed in Scripture as a foreshadowing of Christ, so it must be, rather, the burnt offering offered on the Sabbath which is a foreshadowing of Christ’s sacrifice. The parallel mention of other ceremonial aspects makes evident that whatever is being stated regarding the Sabbath here is a ceremonial aspect, just as described also in Heb 9:9-10, which lists things imposed only “until the time of reformation.”

³¹ Cole, 277-78; Giem, 208-9.

³² Isa 66:18 prophetically presents both the weekly Sabbath and the new moon (monthly) celebration as continuing to function as regular worship opportunities even in the new earth, showing that it was not God’s intention that the days themselves be discontinued for worship but only the ceremonial activities held on those days that pointed forward to the coming of Messiah.

³³ See note 15 above.

³⁴ Giem, 207-8, states that the grammar does not require that βρώσις καὶ πόσις be referred to by ἄ, but Young, 19, argues in favor of ἄ as “more probably a generalizing neuter referring to all of the elements mentioned in v. 16. . . . The eating or the drinking and the festive days should not be seen as separate from one another.” Cole, 277, points out that Troy Martin’s proposed translation of v. 17, “but [let everyone discern] the body of Christ” (Troy Martin, “But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ” (Colossians 2:17),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 252-54), ignores the fact that σκιὰ τῶν μελλόντων is pejorative, as shown by a comparative study of Col 2:17 and Heb 10:1.

³⁵ Every shadow points to the reality from which it derives, which is why 2:17 calls it “a shadow of coming things,” and the sacrificial body of Christ is that reality. C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 103, suggests that the “body” referred to here, to which the shadow (the sacrificial system) pointed, may be the body of Christ offered in sacrifice as quoted from Ps 40:7 by Heb 10:5: “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, / But a body You have prepared for Me.” See also Heb 10:10.

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gospel was to be centered now in Christ and His atoning work, not in keeping of the old rituals, which were merely shadows pointing forward to Christ.

The Subsequent Context

Paul continues his counsel to the Colossian Christians in 2:18-23 with further warnings against letting anyone disqualify them for their reward through attitudes and practices which are characterized in v. 19 as "not holding fast to the Head [Christ], from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase which is from God." The attitudes and practices mentioned in v. 18 include ascetic self-abasement,³⁶ worship of angels,³⁷ expounding on visions,³⁸ and being groundlessly conceited by a mind fixed on carnal things.³⁹ Paul challenges his readers in vv. 20-22 to ponder their own actions: "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,'⁴⁰ which all concern things which perish with the

³⁶ The adjective "false" has been added to the text in the NKJV and the NIV. This is not necessary. The KJV uses the word "voluntary," which seems a reasonable translation in view of *θέλων*, but Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 120, sees it possibly as a Septuagintalism meaning "delighting Paul's readers are submitting themselves according to the commandments and doctrines of men, not according to the commandment of God or of Christ. In fact, it is implied in v. 20 that these regulations in" (cf. NKJV). The word *ταπεινοφροσύνη* (self-abasement, humility, modesty, being lowly-minded) is used not only here but also in v. 23. This may refer to self-mortification as an act of asceticism or self-imposed piety, as suggested by the adjacent use of *ἐθελοθησκία* (self-made religion or self-imposed piety) in v. 23. See Royalty, 346, 349-50.

³⁷ There is a diversity of opinion about what *θησκακία τῶν ἀγγέλων* means. *θησκακία* refers to the practice of religion, religious service, or cult. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BAGD), ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2d ed., rev. and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (1979), s.v. "θησκακία," states that the being who is worshiped is given in the objective genitive, as here in 2:18. This would imply that angels are actually the objects of worship on the part of those who would attempt to defraud Paul's readers of their reward. Harris, 121, concludes, "What Paul is countering here is not Christian humility but that parade of misguided, false humility or self-humiliation that imagines that God is so holy that he is accessible only through angelic mediation." Royalty, 350, however, prefers a subjective genitive.

³⁸ The use of *ἐμβατεύων* is vague, since it appears only here in the literature of the period, according to BAGD, s.v. "ἐμβατεύω." However, it seems to be used elsewhere in other periods but in similar contexts of entering into a subject either for investigation or for describing the experience in some detail. "Visions" comes from *ἄ ἑώρακεν*, literally, "what things he has seen."

³⁹ See BAGD, s.v. "νοῦς."

⁴⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1991), 119, observes, "'Do not handle' may be a term for curing the human libido," perhaps suggesting sexual celibacy.

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using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?” It is vital to note here that Paul identifies the kinds of regulations to which his readers were subjecting themselves. (1) They are stated as prohibitions, things to abstain from, and they involve the senses—touching, tasting, handling. (2) They are regulations to which the readers have elected to submit themselves,⁴¹ and they are the same kind of regulations (δόγματα) as those abolished by the death of Christ according to v. 14. (3) The regulations all concern things which perish with the using. (4) Paul’s readers are submitting themselves according to the commandments and doctrines of men, not according to the commandment of God or of Christ. In fact, it is implied in v. 20 that these regulations have to do with the basic principles of the world to which the readers have died with Christ through baptism (vv. 12-13). The basic principles (στοιχεῖα)⁴² of the world were already paired in v. 8 with “the tradition of men” and were contrasted with Christ, so the association with the regulations here in v. 20 is in harmony with that negative assessment. Paul completes his assessment of the regulations in v. 23: “These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect⁴³ of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” Self-imposed piety, self-abasement, and ascetic self-abuse characterized the practice of the regulations to which they were submitting themselves, but Paul declares that, although the practice of this form of religion may have had an appearance of wisdom, it was powerless to prevent indulgence of the flesh. In other words, the very thing it purported to guard against, it was unable to prevent. The reason was because it was purely a human effort, and Christ had no real role.

Paul continues, then, in 3:1-5 to challenge his readers to maintain a new life in Christ:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

⁴¹ The use of the middle voice of *δογματίζω* signifies placing oneself under the authority of the regulation (BAGD, s.v. “δογματίζω”).

⁴² The term *στοιχεῖα* is used in a number of places in the NT to refer to essential elements, elemental substances, or fundamental principles. Cf. Gal 4:3,9; Heb 5:12; 2 Pet 3:10,12.

⁴³ The Greek word *ἀφειδία* signifies more than mere neglect. It implies harsh treatment. Harris, 131-32, says that “*ἀφειδία σώματος* may be a periphrasis for ‘asceticism.’”

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This final list of things to put to death in the flesh does not consist of more self-imposed human regulations. Rather, it represents those things that one dies to when one comes to Christ. Christ, not a set of regulations, must be at the center of the consciousness and the motives for one who has been raised with Christ to a new life. "Set your mind on things above" is already defined in the previous verse when it states, "Seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." The mind of the one whose life is hidden with Christ in God takes on a new focus, directing attention to Christ seated at God's right hand. He has all power and authority to convey to the soul that needs to be set free from the desires of the flesh. Only in Christ can one overcome the indulgence of the flesh. Self-imposed piety, self-mortification, and ascetic abuse of the body, including regulations such as "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," have no power to prevent indulgence of the flesh.

In addition, Paul enumerates other things which his readers need to put off: "anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth" (3:8). He goes on to add, "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (vv. 9-10). He concludes v. 11 by stating, "But Christ is all and in all." None of these things is possible apart from Christ being all and in all for the believer.

In 3:12-14 Paul proceeds to list those things which the Christian should put on: "tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind,⁴⁴ meekness, longsuffering; bearing one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection." Most of these are not things one does, but the kind of character one takes on in modeling the perfect, exemplary character of Christ. Verses 15-16 continue to enumerate the changes that take place in the life of the person whose life is hidden with Christ in God: "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, . . . and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Christ's word dwelling in the heart produces gratitude and a joy that is communicated to others in songs of praise to God.

Finally, Paul concludes the section by summarizing in v. 17, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." The name of Jesus as Lord

⁴⁴ The term is the same one (ταπεινοφροσύνη) used pejoratively in 2:18,23, but here the context makes clear that this is a positive character trait, not a questionable practice following useless regulations of self-imposed piety. The key difference is how one gains this character.

is powerful, and whatever is said or done in His name will redound in thanksgiving to God, for there will be none of self to get in the way.

Implications for Theology and Practice

The Epistle to the Colossians is rightly regarded as a work of great Christological importance. As we have seen, Christ is presented as the center of theology and practice. "He is the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation" (1:15). "All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist" (1:16b-17). In Him "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (1:14). "And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence" (1:18). In Him "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (2:9-10). "In Him you were also circumcised . . . by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (2:11-12). At the cross, "having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (2:15). This portrait of the centrality and supremacy of Christ in the life of the world and of the church, and in the triumph over sin and death, forms the basis for the admonition of Paul in 2:16-17, "Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."

It has been shown conclusively that the elements mentioned in 2:16 are things that pertained to the ritual law which was a shadow pointing forward to the sacrifice of Christ's body on the cross and which was therefore "taken out of the way" (v. 14). Christ effectually nailed the ritual law to the cross, so putting an end to the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles and paving the way for the spread of the gospel to all the world through faith in Christ as opposed to coming to God through the sanctuary and its rituals. Neither Jewish nor Gentile Christians could any more be judged based on the old ritual law and its distinctions and practices. Christ brought in a new means of access to God. Instead of the old circumcision made with human hands, baptism represented a new "circumcision made without hands," namely, "the circumcision of Christ," accomplished "by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh" (2:11-12). Gentiles no longer had to be circumcised and perform the ritual law to be able to come into the presence of God and feel accepted by Him. Now, through baptism, they were raised with Christ "through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead," and they were "made alive together with Him," having been forgiven all their trespasses (2:12-13). The handwritten law of ritual regulations which was against them was wiped out and taken out of the way (2:14).

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Not only were the old Jewish regulations no longer to stand in their way and allow others to judge them by it, but they needed to be set free from the ascetic concerns and practices of some who felt that they could subdue the desires of the flesh through rules such as "Do not touch, do not taste, and do not handle," through self-imposed piety consisting of rules of self-abnegation and physically punishing the body. These were humanly devised methods that did not result in achieving either control of fleshly desires or peace with God (2:20-23). The only solution for the believer is to "seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God" (3:1). If the reader will keep his or her focus on Christ and His exemplary character, power, and intercessory work at the right hand of God, the mind and character will be transformed into the image of the One who "is the image of the invisible God" (1:15). The believer will not set his or her mind on things on the earth but on things above (3:2). They will put off the things that are unrepresentative of the character of Christ, but will put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, and love instead (3:12-14). They will forgive as Christ has forgiven them (3:13). Whatever they do in word or deed, they will do all in the name of Jesus their Lord, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (3:17). Christ will be at the center of their thoughts and motives. This is Paul's central message to the church at Colossae.

What does this say about the relation of the believer to Christian standards of conduct? Does Col 2:16-17 justify the believer in ignoring Christian standards? Just as with the rituals and regulations that Paul and his readers were dealing with in the Epistle to the Colossians, apart from a Christ-centered approach to character development, regulations and standards become meaningless, for they detract from the very object to which they should be focusing attention, namely, Christ, and they are powerless to change the heart and prevent indulgence of the carnal desires. However, if Christ is first in the heart and the affections, and the focus is kept on Christ, the true Christian will choose to put off the old ways to which he or she died in baptism and put on new ways which reflect the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22-23). There will be an emphasis on the principles of the gospel of Christ rather than on standards of behavior in the form of rituals and regulations. This does not mean that standards are done away with any more than Christ's abrogation of the ritual law did away with the principles and standards of the moral law, but there will be a change of focus. The principles of the moral law, which form the standard of Christian character, are now written by Christ on the heart and mind (cf. Heb 8:10), and there is a desire on the part of the believer to live out the life of Christ in patterns of Christlike behavior (cf. 1 John 2:6; 3:2-3). Rather than adhering to self-imposed external rules and regulations, the Christian uses the standard of Christ's life as the measuring rod against which to evaluate his or her own patterns of thought and behavior. Instead of living up to the expectations of others, as in Col 2, the individual Christian

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focuses the attention upon Christ and attempts to reflect as clearly as possible that standard of life and character. Thus no one can judge the Christian believer by any external norms, but Christ will judge the life by the devotion one has to Him and to attempts to emulate His character. This truly frees the believer to have peace with God and with others, outflowing with expressions of gratitude and joy.

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