

An Exegesis of

Colossians 2:8-12

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION
2. BACKGROUND TO THE EPISTLE
  - 2.1. AUTHOR, DATE, AND PROVENANCE
  - 2.2. OCCASION AND THE “COLOSSIAN HERESY”
  - 2.3. THE TEXT
3. EXEGESIS OF COLOSSIANS 2:8-12
  - 3.1. PAUL’S PROHIBITION (2:8)
    - 3.1.1. Translation
    - 3.1.2. Interpretation
  - 3.2. THE RATIONALE FOR THIS PROHIBITION (2:9-12)
    - 3.2.1. Rationale #1—Response to Mystical Speculation (2:9-10)
      - 3.2.1.1. Translation
      - 3.2.1.2. Interpretation
    - 3.2.2. Rationale #2—Response to Jewish Legalism (2:11-12)

- 3.2.2.1. Translation
- 3.2.2.2. Interpretation
- 4. CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION
- 5. CONCLUSION
- 6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

## Colossians 2:8-12

8 Blevpete mhv ti" uJma`" e[stai oJ sulagwgw`n dia; th`" filosofiva" kai; kenh`" ajpavth" kata; th;n paravdosin tw`n ajnqrwvwpwn, kata; ta; stoicei`a tou` kovsmou kai; ouj kata; Cristovn: 9 o{ti ejn aujtw`/ katoikei` pa`n to; plhvrwma th`" qeovthto" swmatikw`", 10 kai; ejste; ejn aujtw`/ peplhrwmevnoi, o{ " ejstin hJ kefalh; pavsh" ajrch`" kai; ejxousiva". 11 jEn w/ kai; perietmhvqhte peritomh`/ ajceiropoihvtw/ ejn th`/ ajpekdivsei tou` swvmato" th`" sarkov", ejn th`/ peritomh`/ tou` Cristou`, 12 suntafevnte" aujtw`/ ejn tw`/ baptismw`/, ejn w/ kai; sunhgevraqhte dia; th`" pivstew" th`" ejnergeiva" tou` qeou` tou` ejgevvranto" aujto;n ejk nekrw`n.

“Make sure that no one takes you captive through human understanding and empty deceit related to human tradition and the supernatural powers of the world rather than Christ, because in Him all the fullness of the divine nature dwells in bodily form. And you have been made full in Him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In Him you also were circumcised with a circumcision not done by hands, in the stripping off of the body of flesh by Christ’s circumcision, since you were 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.”

## INTRODUCTION

At the core of Paul’s letter to the Colossians is the belief that practice ought to be motivated by proper theology. Proper theology, for Paul, is a theology that centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ and refuses to endure any distractions that would detract from His significance. Many distractions surrounded the Colossian church, just as they do Christians in America today. One particular distraction tempted the church in Colosse which has now been termed the

“Colossian Heresy.” In Colossians 2:8-12, Paul provided a solution for this heretical temptation that faced the church in Colosse. That solution is just as valid for the church in America today—the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

## BACKGROUND TO THE EPISTLE

### Author, Date, and Provenance

The letter to the Colossians claims to be written by the apostle Paul, perhaps with the aid of Timothy as co-author and/or amanuensis (Col. 1:1). Perhaps the strongest evidence for Pauline authorship, outside of the letter’s own attestation, is the close relationship between Colossians and Philemon. Few doubt the Pauline authorship of Philemon. The relationship in literary style and occasion between Colossians and Philemon is also well documented. It appears difficult, therefore, to affirm the Pauline authorship of Philemon and then doubt the Pauline authorship of Colossians.[1] Even Georg Kümmel, after discussing critical approaches to the authorship of this epistle, claims that it is “accordingly to be regarded as doubtless Pauline.”[2]

Paul likely wrote this letter during his first Roman imprisonment, probably between A.D. 60 and 61 (Col. 4:10, 18), though it is certainly possible that it was written during his imprisonment in Caesarea or Ephesus.[3] It was written to the church in Colosse, which is located in the Lycus River valley in Phrygia in the province of Asia. Paul himself had never visited Colosse (2:1); however, on his third missionary journey, he had preached in Ephesus for two years at the lecture hall of Tyrannus, and many throughout Asia were converted (Acts 19). A man named Epaphras may have been one of those converts who later planted a church in Colosse (1:7). Churches were also planted in Laodicea and Heiropolis (2:1; 4:13, 16). The letter was carried by Tychicus, but Paul also sent another man along named Onesimus, who is probably the Onesimus mentioned in Paul’s letter to Philemon.[4]

### Occasion and the “Colossian Heresy”

While Paul was in prison, false teachings began to be circulated in the area around Colosse that had threatened the church. It seems that Epaphras came to Paul in Rome (4:12) and explained the nature of the heresy. This prompted the writing of Paul’s letter to the Colossians. From the tone of the letter, it does not appear that the church had yet become captivated by this new philosophy. There is very little in the letter by way of rebuke; if anything, it reads more as a warning. For instance, in 2:4-5, Paul states, “I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.” The following is representative of the tone of the letter:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.[5]

Paul affirmed to them that they had been reconciled to God by Christ's death, but also reminded them of the need for perseverance in the gospel.

The so-called "Colossian Heresy" gives the appearance of a "Greek-influenced form of Jewish philosophy." [6] They had combined two seemingly incongruous beliefs. First, they held to mystical speculations (2:8), including "occult speculations and practices based on 'tradition.'" [7] This was a mystical rather than analytical or logical heresy. It included the "worship of angels" [8] as well as attaining mystical visions, giving them an elitist attitude—"puffed up with idle notions" (2:18). Second, the Colossian heresy appeared to combine this mysticism with Jewish legalism (2:16-17, 20-23). They adopted many of the Jewish rituals and applied them in a rigorous, even ascetic manner.

It is impossible to identify with certainty the exact nature of this heresy. Some have thought it to be a form of Gnosticism; however, most scholars believe fully orbed Gnosticism to be a second century development. At best, it can be seen as a form of insipient Gnosticism. F. F. Bruce, however, has noted many similarities between the Colossian Heresy and an ancient form of Jewish mysticism called Merkabah mysticism. [9] It was present in Phrygia (an area known for syncretism) during the time this epistle was written, and it contains the necessary syncretism between Jewish thought and Hellenistic speculation. Discussing this ancient heresy can provide insight into what was likely the nature of the Colossian heresy, and it may explain some of the vocabulary, as well as the perspectives, that Paul used to refute it.

The goal of Merkabah mysticism was to mystically ascend to God's heavenly throne room and see Ezekiel's vision of God on his chariot-throne (Heb. merkabah) in Ezekiel 1:15-25. F. F. Bruce continues,

For gaining such a vision punctilious observance of the minutiae of the law, not least the law of purification, was essential. Moreover, in addition to what the law required of every pious Jew, a period of asceticism, variously estimated at twelve or forty days, was a necessary preparation. Then, when the heavenly ascent was attempted, the mediatorial role of angels was indispensable; it was important, therefore, not to incur their hostility, for the ascent was attended by great perils. [10]

The Merkabah mystics, according to Gershom Scholem, were similar to the later Gnostics in that they sought "the ascent of the soul from the earth, through the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos, and its return to its divine home in the 'fullness' of God's light." In fact, Scholem considers it a form of "Jewish Gnosticism." [11]

The description of this mystical ascension developed over time. In one description, the traveler must pass through seven heavens, and once in the seventh heaven, he must pass through seven palaces. Each heaven was guarded by an archon, and each palace was guarded by an “angelic gatekeeper.” These angelic beings were hostile creatures, and must be placated through worship if the journey was to be successful. There are reports of travelers dying, going insane, or committing apostasy during the ascent or return. Once before God’s throne, the traveler would worship God along side the praises of angels. Such an experience was considered a highly coveted prize.[12]

The Colossian heresy may or may not have been a form of ancient Merkabah mysticism. However, it is one example of how ascetic Jewish legalism can be practiced along side of mystical speculation. As such, it explains how the heretics in Phrygia might have observed Jewish rituals with scrupulous fidelity, including “harsh treatment of the body” (see Col. 2:23) to increase one’s spirituality. It also explains how they might engage in the worship of angels and seek visions to ascend to the heavenly throne room (Col. 2:18).

#### The Text

Paul responded to the Colossian heresy by exalting the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. By exalting the supremacy of Christ (Col. 1:15-23), Paul removes the temptation to rely upon, worship, and/or placate angels and powers encountered in mystical ascension. By proclaiming the sufficiency of Christ (Col. 2:8-23), he encourages his readers that there is no need to look elsewhere; Christ is all we need and will fill us with all we need to ensure our final redemption. The text under discussion here is the first paragraph of Paul’s treatment of the sufficiency of Christ, Col. 2:8-12. The UBS Greek New Testament lists no textual variants for this passage;[13] however, F. F. Bruce lists three minor, largely insignificant variants that pose no real problem in establishing the text. We may assume that the text has been preserved substantially as Paul wrote it.

#### EXEGESIS OF COLOSSIANS 2:8-12

##### Paul’s Prohibition (2:8)

Blevpete mhv ti" uJma`" e[stai oJ sulagwgv`n dia; th`" filosofiva" kai; kenh`" ajpavth" kata; th;n paravdosin tw`n ajnqrwvwpwn, kata; ta; stoicei`a tou` kovsmou kai; ouj kata; Cristovn:

“Make sure that no one takes you captive[14] through human understanding and empty deceit related to human tradition[15] and the supernatural powers of the world, rather than Christ.”

##### Translation

Blevpete here is a figurative extension of its root meaning, “I see.” It means “to be ready to learn about future dangers or needs, with the implication of preparedness to respond appropriately - ‘to beware of, to watch out for, to pay attention to.’”[16] It is perhaps best not to

translate filosofiva" with its English cognate; it refers to human speculation and understanding, in opposition to divine revelation, including mystical speculations. This wisdom is not limited to the discipline of logical, analytical and philosophical study.[17] Perhaps Calvin said it best when he said that the word "means everything that men contrive of themselves when wishing to be wise on their own understanding." [18]

The phrase ta; stoicei`a tou` kovsmou is problematic. It may be translated with the NIV as "the basic principles of the world," since stoicei`a can mean "basic principles which underlie the nature of something - 'basic principles, elementary concepts.'" [19] However, stoicei`a may also mean "the supernatural powers or forces regarded as having control over the events of this world - 'the supernatural powers over this world.'" [20] Given the nature of the Colossian heresy, it seems that the latter is more likely to be the intent of the apostle Paul. Paul is likely referring to the supernatural forces relied upon by the Colossian mystics in their heavenly ascent. [21]

#### Interpretation

It seems apparent from this verse that the Colossian heresy was not springing up within the Colossian church. Rather, it was an outside enemy that was threatening to take members of the congregation captive as plunder. Yet the "philosophy" that threatened the church was nothing more than empty deceit, since it did not depend on Christ. Rather, it depended on human tradition and supernatural spirits or powers.

The "human tradition" is likely a reference to the Jewish legalism mentioned throughout this section (see 2:13, 16-17, 20-23). In fact, in v. 20-21, Paul describes obeying rules like "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" as the kinds of things that people "living in the world" would do. Of course, the torah is not a "human tradition." Even Paul claims that the law is both spiritual and good (Rom. 7:7, 14). Yet, while these Jewish mystics may have striven to scrupulously obey the torah, they did not do so in a way consistent with the torah itself. In fact, it appears to have advocated an ascetic devotion to the torah (2:23). As such, the tradition followed by these heretics is just as "human" as the legalistic traditions followed by the Pharisees.

The "supernatural powers of the world" is likely a reference to the angelic powers used as aids in their mystical ascension to God's throne room. These planetary demons and other supernatural forces were thought to be aids in approaching God. As such, they distracted from pure devotion to Christ himself. Christ perhaps was just one angelic power to be placated or worshipped during this heavenly ascension. Again in verse 20, Paul emphatically claimed that Christians have died to the stoicei`a tou` kovsmou, making it completely unnecessary to submit to the world's rules.

Paul introduced these two prepositional phrases kata; th;n paravdosin tw`n ajnqrwvwpwn and kata; ta; stoicei`a tou` kovsmou with a kata;, without separating them with a kai;. This would in effect place them in apposition to each other, suggesting that the two are in fact the same. This is hinted at in 2:20, where legalism is seen as submitting to the rules of the stoicei`a. In Gal. 3:19,

Paul mentioned that the law was put into effect by angels. Perhaps the mystics carried this further when they developed their ascetic devotion to the torah and sought to placate angels in mystical ascension.

The Rationale for this Prohibition (2:9-12)

Rationale #1—Response to Mystical Speculation (2:9-10)

o{ti ejn aujtw` / katoikei` pa`n to; plhvrwma th`" qeovthto" swmatikw`", kai; ejste; ejn aujtw` / peplhrwmevnoi, o{" ejstin hJ kefalh; pavsh" ajrch`" kai; ejxousiva".

“because in Him all the fullness of the divine nature dwells in bodily form. And you have been made full in Him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.”

Translation

Here the o{ti is used to introduce a clause providing the rationale for the previous sentence, so it should be translated “because” or “since” instead of “that.” The phrase to; plhvrwma th`" qeovthto" (“the fullness of the divine nature”) ought to be understood as “the totality of the divine nature.”[22] The adverb swmatikw`" is somewhat difficult to translate literally. After suggesting the translation “‘in physical form,’” Louw and Nida offer an alternative interpretation meaning, “‘in reality,’ that is to say, ‘not symbolically’”[23] The indicative verb and participle ejste;... peplhrwmevnoi form a periphrastic construction and is practically synonymous with using the perfect, passive, indicative of plhrovw, “you have been made full.”

Interpretation

For those who adopted the Colossian heresy, the plhvrwma likely was found in ascending to the heavenly throne room through mystical visions.[24] Reliance must be given to other angelic beings (as well as human effort through the law) to obtain this “fullness.” Yet Paul is emphatic that if one wants to achieve “fullness,” he need not look any further than Jesus Christ. The phrase ejn aujtw`/, therefore, is brought to the front of the clause for emphasis. All the “fullness of deity” is found in Christ, not in the stoicei`a or anything else. He is both fully God and fully man, and therefore the perfect mediator between the two.

Not only that, but in verse 10, Paul insists that the union Christians have with Him ensures that they already have that fullness in Him. It is unnecessary to resort to angelic beings or stoicei`a. There is no need to seek in other things what one already has in Christ. Calvin says it beautifully. “Those, therefore, who do not rest on Christ alone, injure God in two ways; for besides detracting from the glory of God, by desiring something above His perfection, they are also ungrateful, inasmuch as they seek elsewhere what they already have in Christ.”[25]

Paul expands on his statement here in the following paragraphs (2:13-23). His fear was that mystical speculations (i.e., “false humility” and the “worship of angels”) would “disqualify” (katabrabeuvw) them from the prize (2:18). He also expressed concern about “self-imposed

worship”[26] (2:23). As Calvin writes, this is a “voluntary worship which men choose of their own free will, without a command from God.”[27] Yet the visions attained in these mystical experiences are actually “unspiritual” and serve no purpose but increase one’s arrogance, to “puff him up with idle notions” (2:18 NIV). Those “powers” relied upon in mystical ascension have been soundly defeated by Christ. In fact, He made a “public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (2:15 NIV). However, Paul has insisted that it is in Christ and His redemption that God has already “qualified” (iJkanovw) them “to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (1:12 NIV). So, reliance on these defeated powers ought to be considered completely unnecessary in the face of Christ’s sufficiency.

#### Rationale #2—Response to Jewish Legalism (2:11-12)

jEn w/ kai; perietmhvqhte peritomh`/ ajceiropoihtw/ ejn th`/ ajpekdivsei tou` swvmato" th`" sarkov", ejn th`/ peritomh`/ tou` Cristou`, suntafevnte" aujtw`/ ejn tw`/ baptismw`/, [28] ejn w/ kai; sunhgevraqhte dia; th`" pivstew" th`" ejnergeiva" tou` qeou` tou` ejgevvranto" aujto;n ejk nekrw`n: [29]

“In Him you also were circumcised with a circumcision not done by hands, in the stripping off of the body of flesh by Christ’s circumcision, since you were 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.”

#### Translation

The phrase tou` swvmato" th`" sarkov" is difficult, since both swvmato" and sarkov" can be used either literally or by figurative extension. The phrase is used only one other time in the New Testament, in Col. 1:22, where it refers to Christ’s physical body in death. Such may be the case here in 2:11, but this is not entirely obvious. It is grammatically possible to see the phrase as a reference to the stripping off of Christian’s sinful nature, as is indicated by the NIV.[30] In fact, some late cursive manuscripts add tw'n aJmartiw'n after tou` swvmato" to make this explicit.[31] However, the verbal parallel with 1:22 would suggest that the reference is to Christ. The only other time the phrase is used in the New Testament is in this letter, where it refers to Christ’s physical death. If, as is likely, physical death is also meant here, it must refer to Christ, since Paul’s audience was very much alive.

The next phrase ejn th`/ peritomh`/ tou` Cristou` is also problematic. It may be seen as either a subjective genitive, referring to a circumcision done by Christ (see the NIV), or as an objective genitive, where Christ himself is circumcised at his crucifixion. Those who argue for the former claim that the “circumcision of Christ” is contrasted with the “circumcision not done by human

hands” in this verse.[32] Christians do not receive a physical circumcision by human hands, but a spiritual circumcision performed by Christ.

However, those who argue for the latter will note Paul’s use of the phrase “body of death” in Col. 1:22 and 2:11. In Col. 1:22, it is by Christ’s “body of flesh through death” that God reconciled us. In parallel fashion, in Col. 2:11, it is by “stripping away [Christ’s] body of flesh” in His circumcision (i.e., crucifixion) that we are “circumcised” to Him. Meredith Kline calls it “the mystery of a divine circumcision—the circumcision of God in the crucifixion of his only begotten.”[33] It is also worth noting the verbal parallels when Paul’s baptismal expression in Col. 2:11-12 is compared to Rom. 6:3-4. “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” In Romans 6, the individual is to identify with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Likewise, in Col. 2, the believer is identified with Christ in His burial and resurrection, with “the circumcision of Christ” functioning in a parallel manner to Christ’s death in Rom. 6.[34]

The adverbial participle *suntafevnte* ought to be taken causatively as “since you were buried...”[35] The phrase *ejn wl/* (v. 12) may be translated “in which” (with the antecedent “baptism”) or “in whom” (with the antecedent “Christ”). Word order would indicate that the former is more likely. The participle *tou` ejgevvranto* is adjectival and modifies “God.”

#### Interpretation

The Colossian mystics advocated strict, even ascetic, adherence to the torah. As such, circumcision was likely a central tenant of obedience to God in this heretical group. Yet for Paul, physical circumcision is now completely unnecessary. In Christ’s obedience and His “circumcision” on our behalf, he has fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law in our stead. As Meredith Kline explains, circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized an oath of allegiance to Yahweh. The cutting of the foreskin was only a token cutting. Should the covenant-child grow up and become a covenant breaker, he would receive the curses of the covenant. He was to be “cut off”—that is, circumcised—from his people by death (Gen. 17:14; Ex. 4:24-6). Of course, the hope was that the child would be faithful to the covenant. As such, the circumcision oath was also an act of consecration. This fact is evident in the “circumcision of the heart” passages in the Old Testament (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:24; c.f. Rom. 2:29). Jeremiah exclaims in an effort to spare the people of Judah from judgment, “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; circumcise your hearts!” (Jer. 4:4).[36]

In order to fulfill the law, Christ was circumcised on the eighth day as the torah prescribed (Luke 2:21-40). However, Christ did not just fulfill the token. He bore the full curse of all our disobedience to the covenant by being “cut off” on the cross. Meredith Kline writes,

But it was the circumcision of Christ in crucifixion that answered to the burnt-offering of Genesis 22, as a perfecting of circumcision, a “putting off” not merely of a token part but “of the [whole] body of the flesh” (Col. 2:11, ARV), not simply a symbolic oath-cursing but a cutting off of “the body of his flesh through death” (Col. 1:22).[37]

The purpose of Christ’s circumcision in death was to bear the full curse of the Old Covenant. He bore the covenant-curse in our place (Gal. 3:10-13). In fact, by His death he cancelled the ceirovgrafon (the “certificate of debt”), nailing it to the cross (Col. 2:15).[38] As such, we are circumcised to Him as an act of consecration, not by a physical circumcision but by the death of Christ (Col. 2:11). His circumcision thus abrogated any need to keep the torah as a means of obtaining or maintaining salvation with God. In fact, any attempt to do so would be in effect a denial of the sufficiency of Christ’s “circumcision” on the cross.

One more parallel with Col. 2:15 is worth noting. In 2:11, Paul states that Christ’s circumcision was an ajpekduvsei (a “stripping away”)[39] Christ’s “body of flesh.” In 2:15, Paul says that Christ “disarmed” (NIV/NASB, from ajpekduvmeno“).[40] The Greek word is simply the verb form of the noun used in verse 11, and it means to “strip away,” usually with reference to clothing.[41] Here it may be, as the NIV and NASB suggest, a stripping away of the weapons of Christ’s adversaries. It may also be, as Kline suggests, a reference to the stripping away of an opponent’s belt after a victory in a wrestling match. Either way, the parallel wording would suggest that the effect of Christ being stripped of His body of flesh in death was the stripping away of Christ’s opponents. Kline writes, “His death-burial-resurrection was then a victory over the accusers, a stripping away of their legal claims, exposing, overcoming, and casting them out through the belt-grappling of a divine ordeal.”[42] Christ, now physically resurrected, stands as Victor in this divine ordeal, and so there is no reason for them to seek out defeated powers for help when the Victor now lives in them (Col. 1:27).

For Paul, the bloodless rite of baptism in the New Testament era symbolized the Christian’s union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection and served as a replacement for physical circumcision. This identification is not made superficially by the mode of baptism, being somehow immersed in and raised out of water. The reason for this identification is that water itself is indicative of judgment and death. Noah was baptized and saved though the waters of judgment surrounding him (1 Pet. 3:20-22). Moses was baptized and saved by crossing through the waters of judgment in the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1-5). In neither of these examples were those saved immersed in water; the waters surrounded them, bringing death as judgment on others, though God’s people were saved. Just as the Israelites were baptized “into Moses” as he led them through the waters (1 Cor. 10:2), so we are baptized “into Christ” and spared the judgment of eternal death (Rom. 6:3; Col. 2:12). Our baptism “into Him” thus consecrates us to Him (like

circumcision of old) as the One who is sufficient to lead us through the waters of death into eternal salvation. It expresses the union between Christ and His covenanted community. This union Christians already have would certainly abrogate any need to seek it through circumcision, keeping the law, and placating defeated powers. There is no need for people to seek what they already have.[43]

#### CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

M. D. Hooker, after analyzing the “Colossian heresy,” concluded that, in fact, there may not have been any group of heretics threatening the Colossian church. In fact, it may be that Paul was simply writing to them about cultural dangers and distractions surrounding them.[44] This is probably not the case; however, it is a reminder that we do not need a “Colossian heresy” to be tempted by heretical views. The philosophies of the culture around us can be just as tempting. In fact, they can have “the appearance of wisdom,” but still “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (2:23). As such, they are nothing but “empty deceit” (2:8).

Paul was challenging what must be understood as an experiential heresy. The Colossian heresy sought ecstatic experience and moral renovation through asceticism and mystical ascension. As such, a drive for experience seems to have replaced good theology. Those who may have been tempted to follow these mystics needed to understand the importance of good theology. Good theology, however, is not simply memorizing a systematic outline of doctrines. It is first and foremost a knowledge and understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. So, Paul exalted the supremacy of His person and the sufficiency of His work. Systematic theology results from this knowledge and understanding of Jesus in the light of His Word, and our experiences ought to be interpreted in light of this theology.

So too, in contemporary America, the drive for an experience of worship can at times overshadow a proper understanding of Christ’s sufficiency. Our worship may be reduced to a mere “self-made worship” rather than a worship centered in God’s revelation. The American Church may not be as tempted by the kind of heresy that threatened the Church in Colosse. However, the problem we face is basically the same: a drive to find an “experience” in worship, rather than ensuring that our worship is motivated by good theology. We ought to seek an experience that is pleasing to Him rather than us. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with enjoying worship; however, enjoyment of worship should never be sought at the expense of honoring Him.

The Colossian church was also threatened by a heresy that elevated law and legalism over devotion to Christ. Paul denounced such an attitude as a product of “human tradition” lacking any ability whatsoever to produce real sanctification. After all, Christ, in His circumcision, burial, and resurrection has fulfilled the law and paid for every act of our disobedience. Paul did not motivate people to keep the law as a “rule of life” by hanging it over their heads and

burdening them with a plethora of rules and regulations. In fact, his “imperative” (what we must do) is always motivated by an “indicative” (what Christ did for us). Before summarizing ethical commands in Col. 3:5ff., he reminded them that they have been “raised with Christ” (3:1), that they had died and their life was “hidden with Christ in God” (3:3), giving them confidence in their salvation when Christ returns (3:4). His ethical commands are set in the context of identifying with Christ in His death-circumcision. He told them to “put to death” (3:5) and “strip off” (3:9)[45] the sinful nature and to “put on” (3:10) and “clothe yourselves” (3:12) with the new nature. His motivation for them to keep the law as a “rule of life” is based on their union with Him in His life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and session.

Yet human nature is the same now as then, and Christians in America today are just as tempted to motivate people to “love and good deeds” on the basis of law, fear, even manipulation. It may seem almost unbelievable that we are more strongly motivated to keep the law by having a radical understanding of our own forgiveness and our gratitude toward Him. To further suggest that our simple union with Him and identification with Him in his death and resurrection would motivate us may seem even foolish. Yet it is this radical understanding that Paul wants us to embrace—to trust in the gospel message, not just for our justification but for our sanctification as well—to continue living in Him just as we received Him as Lord (Col. 2:6).

## CONCLUSION

The mystics in Colosse sought experiential “fulfillment” at the expense of good theology centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ, and it appears that to some degree, this mystical heresy threatened the Colossian church. Paul’s response was to exalt the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. In Colossians 2:8-12, Paul was primarily concerned with how the sufficiency of Christ should mitigate any need to seek “fulfillment” from mystical visions and/or a legalistic approach to the law. Those two distractions from Christ served no purpose but to diminish His sufficiency in their hearts and minds. In fact, these mystics were turning to defeated enemies of Christ, rather than to the Victor—Christ Himself. Yet genuine fulfillment is available in Christ, and while it may not be as superficially spectacular or ecstatic, it is nevertheless genuine, and truly found nowhere else. Genuine fulfillment is found in our identification with the person and work of Jesus Christ Himself, in whom “all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.”

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[1] The New Bible Dictionary s.v. "Colossians, Epistle to the" (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1962).

[2] Werner Georg Kümmel, Introduction to the New Testament (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 244.

[3] D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 334-35.

[4] Reggie Kidd, notes submitted to the New Geneva Study Bible.

[5] Col. 1:21-22 (NIV).

[6] Kidd, NGSB notes.

[7] Ibid.

[8] The “worship of angels” may be either an objective genitive (worshipping angels) or a subjective genitive (participating in angelic worship). See later discussion on Merkabah mysticism.

[9] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 23-6. See also Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 360-1.

[10] Ibid. 23-4.

[11] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem, 1941), 48, cited in Bruce, 24.

[12] Bruce, 24-5.

[13] *The Greek New Testament*, 4th Rev. ed. (Germany: United Bible Societies, 1983).

[14] The participle οἱ συλαγωγῶντες ought to be taken substantivally with its object ὑμᾶς. Literally, the text would read, “not anyone will be the one who takes you captive...”

[15] τῶν ἀνιχνεύοντων is a genitive of description. See James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979), 8.

[16] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988/89), 27.58.

[17] Ibid. 32.38.

[18] John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians & Colossians*, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 329.

[19] Louw & Nida, 58.19.

[20] Ibid. 12.43.

[21] Bruce, 99. One must not necessarily conclude from this that Paul acknowledged the existence of these *στοιχεῖα*. It may well be that his concern was only to convince them to rely upon them without challenging their existence.

[22] Louw & Nida, 59.32.

[23] Ibid. 8.2

[24] Bruce, 24-5.

[25] Calvin, 331.

[26] Louw & Nida, 53.12: “a set of religious beliefs and practices resulting from one’s own desires and initiative—‘self-imposed religion, religion thought up by oneself.’”

[27] Calvin, 343.

[28] Some manuscripts use *baptivsmati*, a third declension form of *baptismw*. See Bruce, 102n.56.

[29] Some manuscripts include an article *εἰς τῶν νεκρῶν*. See Bruce, 103n.58. The difference is insignificant.

[30] See also Louw & Nida, 49.20.

[31] Bruce, 102n.55. It is not found in  $\alpha^2$ , D1 and Y.

[32] So F. F. Bruce, 104, who prefers “the circumcision effected by Christ.”

[33] Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 45.

[34] *Ibid.* 71.

[35] See Brooks & Winbery, 147-8.

[36] Kline, 44-5.

[37] *Ibid.* 45.

[38] See *Ibid.* 71-2.

[39] From the noun *ajpevkdusi~*.

[40] An adverbial participle from the verb *ajpekduvomai* which appears to have temporal force here, “after disarming the rulers and authorities....”

[41] See Louw & Nida, 49.20.

[42] Kline, 73.

[43] Kline, 67-69.

[44] M. D. Hooker, “Were there False Teachers in Colossae?” in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, eds. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley (Cambridge 1973), 315-31; cited in Bruce, 18-19.

[45] *ajpekduvmenoi*, same word as in 2:15. It is the verb form of *ajpekduvsi~* in 2:11.