

Colossians 1:24–2:23

PAUL'S MISSION AND CONCERN / 1:24–2:5

Paul was combating a false teaching in the Colossian church similar to Gnosticism (from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*). This heresy can be called “proto-Gnosticism” because full-fledged Gnosticism did not blossom until the second century. It undermined Christianity in several basic ways: (1) It insisted that important secret knowledge was hidden from most believers; Paul, however, said that Christ provides all the knowledge we need. (2) It taught that the body was evil; Paul countered by affirming that God himself lived in a body—that is, he was embodied in Jesus Christ. (3) It contended that Christ only seemed to be human, but was not; Paul insisted that Jesus is fully human and fully God.

Though Gnosticism did not become fashionable until the second century, even in Paul’s day these ideas sounded attractive to many, and exposure to such teachings could easily seduce a church that didn’t know Christian doctrine well. Similar teachings still entice many in the church today. We combat heresy by becoming thoroughly acquainted with God’s Word through personal study and sound Bible teaching. In this chapter, Paul wanted to help the Colossian believers guard against those who would undermine the simple faith and sufficiency they had found in Christ.

CALLED TO SUFFER

Paul never feared suffering, for he knew that God was in control, that his suffering helped others to be more courageous in spreading the gospel, and that one day all suffering would end and he (along with all believers) would be with the Father. The New Testament abounds with warnings about suffering and words of comfort for those who are suffering.

<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Words about Suffering</i>
Jesus	Matthew 5:10–12	Those who are persecuted are called “blessed.”
Jesus	Matthew 20:23	The Son of Man will return and end all suffering.
Jesus	John 15:20	Jesus was persecuted; we will be persecuted.
The Apostles	Acts 5:41	We can rejoice for being considered worthy to suffer for Christ.
Jesus	Acts 9:16	Paul was called to suffer for Jesus’ name.
Paul	Romans 8:17	As children and heirs, we will share in Jesus’ suffering.
Paul	2 Corinthians 1:3–7	God gives comfort in suffering.
Paul	2 Corinthians 4:7–12	Paul suffered so that others might be saved.
Paul	2 Corinthians 6:4–5, 9–10	Paul suffered yet rejoiced.
Paul	Ephesians 3:13	Our sufferings can glorify God.
Paul	Philippians 1:29	Suffering for Christ’s name is a privilege.

Paul	2 Timothy 1:12	We must not be ashamed of suffering; trust Christ.
Paul	2 Timothy 2:10	Paul suffered for the sake of other believers.
Paul	2 Timothy 3:11	God will rescue us from suffering—now or in eternity.
Paul	2 Timothy 4:5	We are called to endure hardship.
Author of Hebrews	Hebrews 10:32–34	We can face suffering because we know we have God’s inheritance.
James	James 1:2	We can consider it pure joy to face trials.
Peter	1 Peter 1:6	Our suffering is refining our faith.
Peter	1 Peter 2:21	We suffer because Christ suffered.
Peter	1 Peter 3:13–14	We are blessed for suffering for what is right.
Peter	1 Peter 4:1, 13, 16	We suffer yet rejoice because we suffer for Christ.
Jesus	Revelation 2:10	We must be faithful, even to death; the crown of life awaits us.

1:24 Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. The little word *now* communicates more than just providing a transition. Paul could rejoice precisely because of all that he had just written in 1:15–20; and he could rejoice now (at present) in prison. Sitting in his prison in Rome and suffering for his faith, Paul was able to rejoice. Paul had encouraged the Philippians by explaining that suffering was a privilege (Philippians 1:29) and that the early apostles had rejoiced when they were considered worthy to suffer for believing in Christ (Acts 5:41). Paul informed the churches to whom he wrote that his suffering was not a punishment, nor was it accidental (as though God had somehow lost track of him). Instead, Paul was honored to be suffering, and he rejoiced at what God was doing in the churches and in the believers who were gaining courage and faith by watching Paul’s example. Perhaps the false teachers had pointed to Paul’s imprisonment as proof that his leadership and his teachings were in question. Paul explained that, instead, his imprisonment *proved* the truth of his words, and he could rejoice in that imprisonment knowing that it was all part of God’s plan, *for the sake of his body, which is the church*.

Paul’s words, *I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions*, did not mean that Christ’s suffering was inadequate to save people. Paul believed that Christ’s suffering on the cross alone paid for believers’ salvation from sin: “All have sinned ... and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:23–25 niv). (See also 1 Corinthians 1:18–31; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21; Galatians 1:4; Colossians 2:13–14.)

While we know what Paul did *not* mean by these words, we must consider several interpretations regarding what he *did* mean. How could Paul say that he filled up what was still lacking? There are three main views:

(1) *Affliction refers to the “Messianic Woes.”* Some commentators explain that Paul was referring to a concept of the “Messianic Woes” or “Afflictions of the Messiah” that the Jews believed were a sign and requirement of the Messiah. The Jews believed that before the end time, an anointed ruler would come and God’s people would be called upon to suffer (Daniel 12:1). However, God would set a limit to these sufferings. Some believe Paul took this idea and adapted it for Christians. This view held that the Messiah had already come, but he had promised to come again. Paul saw himself as suffering on behalf of the church, thereby filling up what was lacking of that set amount of suffering. Some commentators consider that Paul thought that by his suffering he actually was saving others from suffering. The more suffering Paul endured, the more suffering was fulfilled, and the less others would have to suffer. This view seems unlikely, however, because Paul was tying suffering to the spread of the gospel, not to preparation for the end times.

(2) *Paul’s lacking referred to his own deficiency, not Christ’s.* Referring to Paul’s words in Philippians 3:10 where Paul claimed a desire to “know ... the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (niv), he may have meant that he wanted to fill up in himself what was lacking in his understanding of Christ’s afflictions. This also seems unlikely in this context, however, because Paul was emphasizing the believers’ completeness in Christ (2:10).

(3) *Christ’s afflictions refer to the mystical union between Paul and Christ and between Christ and the church.* This view shows the corporate identity of Paul and Christ, as well as between the church and Christ. That union is best expressed in Paul’s words that the church is Christ’s body. What Paul suffered, Christ suffered, because Paul was a member of Christ’s body on earth. What Christ began as suffering with his persecution and rejection on earth, all believers complete in his continuing body on earth. This view seems most likely because it stresses that the cause of the suffering would be the extension of the gospel to all the world. Paul shared the suffering of the Messiah as he brought the Messiah’s message to the world.

DO YOU SUFFER WELL?

Most people try to avoid suffering, and people who do suffer would prefer not to. We are not created to enjoy pain. As babies, we cried when hungry; later, we cry at grief or loss or impending death.

Paul was not promoting the idea that pain is good, that suffering is joy, and that hurt should be our high ambition. Pain is almost always bad news.

But in Christ, affliction points to good news. As Jesus suffered on Friday, he rose on Sunday. Christians called to endure hardship for the sake of Christ (and this includes even personal suffering like cancer and car accidents) endure their affliction with the assurance that Sunday comes: restoration and resurrection, eternal life. Because Christ guarantees our resurrection, we can handle anything until then.

But until then, we must take our share of pain for Jesus: work hard for his kingdom, give him our best energy and resources, and take the pain of others on ourselves, as Jesus did.

Jesus had warned his followers to expect affliction: “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also ... They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me” (John 15:20–21 niv). This suffering would not be limited to Paul. By identifying themselves with Christ, all believers would face affliction. Not all would face imprisonment, as Paul did, but all would have varying degrees and kinds of suffering simply because they have allied themselves with Christ in a world hostile to Christ. Some affliction is external, some is internal. But suffering comes as an inevitable consequence of believing in Christ and may be unavoidable for those who bring the Good News of Christ to the world.

Suffering, affliction, and persecution, therefore, come naturally as part of the process for building up Christ's church. But this suffering should be cause for rejoicing. Suffering does not mean that Christ is losing ground, but that he is gaining it and that the present age is passing away to eventually herald in the age to come when Christ will reign.

If Christians are not on the firing line, not confronting sin in our culture, or if our standards are too compromised, we won't have any affliction tied to the spread of the gospel. Have we become too comfortable?

1:25 I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you. In 1:23, Paul had referred to himself as "a servant of this gospel"; here Paul again referred to himself as a *servant*, this time as a servant of the church. The Greek word *diakonos* is used in both verses and translated "servant" (or "minister").

Paul's service came because of *God's commission*. To the Galatians, Paul wrote, "Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Galatians 1:1 nrsv). No human had commissioned Paul; no human authority had called him; instead, Jesus Christ himself had spoken to him (Acts 9:4–6). Paul's credentials as an apostle need never be questioned. Although Paul was called after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, he and the other apostles were called by Jesus Christ and God the Father, and they answered to God as their final authority.

Paul explained that this commission was given to him *for you*, that is, for Gentile congregations such as the one in Colosse. When Paul was commissioned by God, the focus of his ministry was made clear. God said of Paul, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles" (Acts 9:15 niv). Paul was keenly aware of who had commissioned him, to whom he had been commissioned, and what he had been called to do. To the Corinthians, Paul had written, "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ... I am simply discharging the trust committed to me" (1 Corinthians 9:16–17 niv).

The word translated "commission" (*oikonomia*, from which we get our word "economy") means "management" or "stewardship." As a well-trusted servant would manage his master's estate, so Paul was entrusted with a special task. He was commissioned **to make the word of God fully known**. Literally translated, this means "to fulfill the word of God." It is the same root word used in 2:24 for "filling up" Christ's afflictions. Paul's ministry among the Gentiles was to fully make known the word of God and to bring the preaching of the word of God to completion. Without Paul's ministry concerning God's plan for Christ and the church, God's Word, the revelation of his will, would be unfinished. The heresy in Colosse focused on mystical knowledge, and only a few could find the "fullness of knowledge" needed for inclusion in their special group. Thus, when Paul wrote of making God's word fully known to all the believers, he was pointing out once again that God's word is for all people. They could have all the wisdom they needed to be saved and to grow in Christ.

1:26 The mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. The false teachers in Colosse believed that spiritual perfection was a hidden plan (or "mystery") that only a few privileged people could discover. Their secret plan was meant to be exclusive. Paul wrote that he was making the word of God fully known (1:25), not just a part of it. Making God's word fully known meant revealing *the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations*. The Greek word for "mystery" (*musterion*) means "a secret revealed to the initiates." Thus, it could be mysterious to those without and a secret to those within. This mystery was hidden, not because only a few could understand it, but because it was hidden until Christ came. In 1:27, the mystery relates to "riches" because God lavished his riches in a wonderful way. The mystery also relates to God's glory because it shares in his very nature. With Christ's coming and the beginning of Christianity, that mystery is no longer hidden; it *has been revealed* to those who believe, that is, *to His saints*. God's plan was hidden

from previous generations, not because God wanted to keep something from his people, but because he was going to reveal it in his perfect timing. Paul was explaining that God's time for action was then and there.

What is that mystery? Paul wrote the answer in Ephesians 3:1–6: "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6 niv). The mystery hidden throughout the ages was that one day Jews and Gentiles would be joined together in one body because of their common belief in Jesus Christ as Savior. The Old Testament revealed that the Gentiles would receive salvation (Isaiah 49:6), but it was never explained that Gentile and Jewish believers would become *equal* in the body of Christ, with no divisions between them. In the Old Testament, Gentiles could convert to Judaism but would always be considered "second-class" Jews, not pure Jews. With the coming of Christ, however, and the new union he created through his church, all believers were joined together in Christ's body, where "there is neither Jew nor Greek [Gentile]" (Galatians 3:28 nkjv). Christ is now in you!

1:27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. To these believers, these New Testament "saints," God chose to make his mystery known among the Gentiles. These words would have been joyful to Paul's Gentile audience, that God *chose* to offer salvation to the Gentiles. They did not need to acquire some secret knowledge in order to find God; God had reached down to them because he wanted to save them.

God's "mystery" is not a puzzle to solve; instead, it is like a treasure chest filled with *glorious riches*, and it is available to anyone who looks for it. Those "riches" are *the hope of glory*—eternity with God the Father. That "hope" is a certainty because of God's provision in Jesus Christ.

SOLVING MYSTERIES

Two questions make up the mystery to which Paul refers:

(1) How could *Yahweh*, the God of the Jews, care about Gentiles now, since the entire Old Testament story is about God giving the Jews victory over the Gentiles? (2) How does *Yahweh*, fearsome and distant, come close to us, since Moses, when he got close, was affected physically for days thereafter?

It's a double mystery of breadth and depth. And here is the clue: it is for you. God has extended his love to all people and has placed his love in your very heart and soul through Christ, who died and rose, and who lives in you. God has come to you in two ways: historically in time and place, and personally in your mind and heart.

Now it's your job to live as though Christ is in you, free of fear and confident of eternal life.

God made the "mystery" available to Jews and Gentiles alike, and the mystery is *Christ in you*. Jews and Gentiles will have that oneness in Christ's body because God had planned from the beginning of time to have Christ live in the heart of each person who believes in him. The indwelling Christ gives believers certainty of their "hope," being in Christ's glorious, eternal kingdom. Believers are in Christ; Christ is in them; therefore, believers can look forward to sharing Christ's glory.

1:28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. Paul switched from "I" to *we* so that he could include his coworkers, particularly Epaphras and Tychicus who served the Colossian church, and also so that he could *exclude* the false teachers. Paul and his coworkers were proclaiming the Good News about Jesus Christ,

who at present was dwelling in them as well as in the Colossian believers, making all of them one body awaiting a glorious future.

Their proclaiming of Jesus Christ included both *warning* and *teaching*. The word “warning” (also translated “admonishing”) connects with repentance and refers to a person’s conduct and heart attitude. “Teaching” is connected to faith and doctrine and refers to a person’s intellect. Paul needed both, especially when dealing with false teachers. He needed to warn the believers about straying from the faith, straighten out any confusion they might have, and strengthen them with the truth of the gospel. Paul pointed out that this warning and teaching was for *everyone*, not an elite group, and that it was always done *in all wisdom*—with every ounce of wisdom Paul and his fellow teachers possessed.

WARN AND TEACH

Christ’s message is for everyone; so everywhere Paul, his coworkers, and the other apostles went, they brought the Good News to all who would listen. An effective presentation of the gospel includes warning and teaching. The warning is that without Christ, people are doomed to eternal separation from God. The teaching is that salvation is available through faith in Christ. As Christ works in you, tell others about him, warning and teaching them in love. Who do you know who needs to hear this message?

The warning and teaching always had one goal in mind: *so that we may present everyone mature in Christ*. This “presentation” would have been when Christ returned, so that every person presently living in union with Christ (every believer) would be complete, full grown, and perfectly instructed in doctrine, faith, and practice. Believers are not to remain like babies in the faith, easily led away by something new (see also 1 Corinthians 3:1–2). Instead, they are to grow up into spiritual maturity so that they cannot be enticed by false teachings. Paul used the word “everyone” twice in this sentence, revealing the availability of this teaching to all believers and the goal of maturity for all believers. God makes this possible only through a personal relationship with Christ. This relationship with Christ, empowered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, helps believers grow in faith and maturity until the day when Christ returns.

GROW UP

The word “mature” is also translated “perfect.” Paul wrote here of the earthly goal of spiritual maturity and completeness, not of flawless and sinless perfection, which is unattainable in this life. Paul wanted to see each believer mature spiritually. Like Paul, we must work wholeheartedly like an athlete, but we should not strive in our own strength alone. We have the power of God’s Spirit working in us. Learn and grow daily, motivated by love, and not by fear or pride, knowing that God gives you the ability to become mature.

1:29 **To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.** This verse vividly portrays the necessity of cooperation and combined effort between believers and Christ. The will of Christ and the will of the person must work together. The work of salvation is “all of Christ and none of me.” The daily practice of servanthood is “all of Christ and all of me.” Paul says, *I labor, struggling*, meaning that he was putting all the effort of his mind and body into the task.

Paul was laboring and struggling for the goal, that he may “present everyone mature in Christ” (1:28 nrsv). Both words describe hard physical work, striving, and conflict, as with an athlete in an arena. Paul’s commission (1:25) was not an easy one. His task was not simple. He did not dash around the world preaching the gospel and then return to a comfortable office. Paul struggled against false teaching, persecution, and questions about his qualifications. He bore heartache and concern on behalf of the churches because he had his goal always before him. Not only did he want people to accept the gospel, but he also wanted them to mature in their faith. Thus he wrote letters, prayed constantly, traveled to many churches, stayed and worked and taught in some places, sent emissaries on his behalf, wrote more letters upon the reports of these emissaries in order to deal with specific situations facing some churches, and sent emissaries back for reports.

Paul did not struggle with his own strength alone, however. His goals were always aligned with God’s goals. His labor was empowered, enabled, and energized by God’s Spirit *with all his energy* (see 1:11; 2:12). Paul needed God’s supernatural power, and God supplied it to Paul when he was at work (see 1 Corinthians 15:10).

2:1 For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. Paul’s labor and struggle (1:29) were not limited to those churches he had planted or even to people he knew personally. Paul also worked on behalf of those who had never met him. He struggled for the Colossians in prayer and with the concern that had prompted the writing of this letter. Paul struggled, knowing that the false teaching threatened to keep the Colossian believers from maturing in their faith.

Laodicea was located a few miles northwest of Colosse. Like the church at Colosse, the Laodicean church was probably founded by one of Paul’s converts while Paul was staying in Ephesus (Acts 19:10), perhaps even Epaphras, who had founded the Colossian church. The city was a wealthy center of trade and commerce, but later Christ would criticize the believers at Laodicea for their lukewarm commitment (Revelation 3:14–22). The fact that Paul mentioned this city and either wanted this letter to be passed on to the church there or wrote a separate one (4:16), indicates that false teaching may have spread there as well. Paul was counting on ties of love bringing the churches together to encourage each other to stand against this heresy and to remain true to God’s plan of salvation in Christ. Our churches should be encouraging, unified communities committed to carrying out Christ’s work.

UNITED IN LOVE

Many ways of being “united” sidestep the crucial ingredient of love. Citizenship unites people by birth to a nation, just as skill and mutual interest unite athletes on a team. In neither situation is love a prominent quality. Sometimes even marriages are more a unity of law and habit than of love.

The church—believers united in Jesus Christ—should be a melting pot of love. These people should act for each other selflessly and feel for each other caringly. No one can mandate or manufacture such love. It comes from God and gets replenished and distributed by the Holy Spirit. We can ask for it, and God will hear our prayers.

Pray often for love in your church. Pray that your love will flow to other relationships and become a witness to a different and better way of life.

2:2–3 My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love. Paul wanted those he had not been able to visit to know that he was interested in them and was praying diligently for them.

They would also be relieved of their anxiety about Epaphras's teachings since Paul endorsed them as true. When writing to churches where he had previously taught, Paul addressed their particular situation in detail. To those he had not yet visited, he wrote more general principles of Christianity; thus, here he simply prayed for the Colossians' encouragement (inner strength) and unity (outer strength). These two characteristics would help them resist false teaching.

So that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ. This is Paul's goal. The encouragement believers receive when they unite together in love gives them a rich and full understanding of God's mystery—Christ. Paul did not want any believers to stop at knowing the glorious riches of his mystery (1:27), he wanted them to have the *full riches of complete understanding*. In the Old Testament, "full riches" meant not only material prosperity, but spiritual blessing. Isaiah 33:6 says, "a rich store of salvation ... the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure" (niv). There is no understanding of God apart from Christ. There is no complete understanding of God apart from a personal relationship with his Son. Christ is the mystery, yet he is a mystery revealed to those who believe—as is the mystery of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27), and the mystery that Gentiles and Jews can be united in one body (1:26).

PUBLIC OR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION?

If Christ is the key to understanding, and all knowledge revolves around Christ, should our children be taught by Christian teachers in a Christian school? Many parents face this question.

The Bible requires this: Youngsters need to acquire a Christ-centered worldview. Faithful discipleship has no secular or value-free closets of knowledge. Everybody we know is linked to an interpretive scheme or set of assumptions about how the world holds together. That scheme should have Christ at its center.

If a public school is your choice, you will need to provide Christian education at home and in church. If a Christian school is your choice, you will need to support and supplement your child's education.

Too many teenagers emerge from basic education with no idea how science, math, social studies, or literature relate to their faith. A Christ-centered worldview puts all knowledge in proper perspective.

This complete understanding obtained through personal relationship with Christ himself assures believers of the truth and helps them recognize and avoid heresy. Everything anyone wants to know about God and his purposes in the world is answered in the person of Christ. The mystery is revealed because it is Christ **in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**. True wisdom is found only in Christ; true knowledge is found only in Christ. Knowledge is often described as good judgment, wisdom as application of that good judgment in the form of good actions. The false teachers claimed to have, through their relation with a supposed hierarchy of supernatural beings, a higher knowledge than what ordinary believers possessed. Against this, Paul argued that all wisdom and knowledge were in Christ and that Christ's treasures were accessible to every believer. *Hidden* does not mean concealed, but rather that they were laid up or stored away to be made available to those who desire relationship with Christ.

Certainly these words greatly comforted the Colossian believers who did not have to look any farther for wisdom and knowledge than to their Savior, Jesus Christ. The believers already possessed all wisdom and knowledge, yet they had a long way to go to attain maturity and complete understanding.

DRAWN IN

Christian faith is a growth track into knowledge of the truth, but along the way, how do we guard against lies?

If your track is too narrow, you become thickheaded and insular—no one can teach you a thing. Before long, you can't teach anyone around you, for no one is listening. You are isolated. Love disappears from your life.

If your track is too wide and every idea is an exciting new possibility, you'll waste a lot of time just keeping on track and risk some dangerous detours.

The key is centering on Christ and grounding yourself in his Word. Learn daily about the Savior. Study the Bible. Develop your theological knowledge. Stay humble and curious about the amazing complexity of the world God has made. Ask lots of questions about the assumptions behind ideas new to you. Press toward wisdom. Pray for understanding. God has given us minds for learning—never quit using yours.

2:4 I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. The believers in Colosse already knew what they needed to know to be saved; they already knew the One they needed to know to have eternal life. But they needed to grow to maturity in the faith they had received. Paul reaffirmed this to them in 2:1–3 so that they would not be deceived by any arguments from false teachers. At first, lies don't sound like lies. The false teachers did a good job of making their teachings sound plausible and of using persuasive tactics to cause the believers to question their faith. When believers are fully committed to the truth in Jesus, they will not be easily deluded when others offer “treasures of wisdom” not found in Christ.

2:5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit. Paul wrote to the Colossians to warn them against false teaching. He explained that although he couldn't be with them due to his imprisonment, he was always with them in spirit. His thoughts were with them, and he was with them because they were united through the Holy Spirit.

Rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. Paul's presence in spirit was so real to him that he wrote of actually “seeing” them—their good order and steadfast faith. *Good order* refers to 2:2 where Paul spoke of their unity as a well-organized, orderly body of believers, resulting in high morale. *The steadfastness of your faith* revealed the solid foundation on which the church had been built. These two characteristics caused Paul to rejoice, for they meant that the Colossians had not succumbed to the false teaching. They were a unified body, steadfast in their faith. Paul's prayers, toil, and struggle had not been in vain. Does your church reflect the same kind of unity and solidarity in faith that Paul rejoiced to see?

NEW LIFE IN CHRIST / 2:6–15

Paul rejoiced in the Colossians' unity and steadfast faith because these proved they had not given ground to the heresy. But Paul wanted to insure that they wouldn't give in and believe the lies of the false teachers. So he launched into a full-scale rebuttal of the false teaching.

2:6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him. The Colossians had not merely received the doctrines of Christ, they had *received Christ* himself. The verb “received” (in Greek, *parelabete*) means more than the moment a person asks Christ into his or her heart. Paul most likely used

the word, taken from Judaism, to describe the transmitting and safeguarding of traditions and teachings from one person or generation to another. Thus when Paul reminded the Colossians of when they received Christ Jesus, he was reminding them of their receiving the proclamation and teaching, and their confession of faith, their baptism, and their new status as members of Christ's body.

Because Christ dwells within all believers through the Holy Spirit, they should *walk* (conduct their lives) in union with the indwelling Christ. The word "walk" refers to ethical conduct and behavior appropriate for those who claim Christ. The verb indicates continuous action: "continue to live" (niv). The past event of receiving Christ should be a present reality in the believers' daily lives.

2:7 Rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. Paul used several metaphors in these verses, first telling believers to walk, then to be rooted like a plant, built like a building, and established like a legal document. Each metaphor has a specific and profound point for Christian living.

First, the Colossians were to be *rooted* in Christ. Just as plants draw nourishment from the soil through their roots, so the believers should draw life-giving strength from Christ. The more they would draw strength from Christ, the less they would be fooled by those who falsely claimed to have life's answers. Paul used the perfect tense of the word, describing a present state that had resulted from a past action. A better translation would be "having been rooted." The Colossians were still rooted in Christ because they had received him.

Second, the Colossians were to be *built up*. This word is in the present tense, describing continuous action. Like a plant, they were "rooted" once and for all, but they had to grow continuously (1:28). Or like a building, they had a solid foundation, but had to keep on building with solid materials in order to be strong.

Third, the Colossians were to be *strengthened in the faith*. This can also be translated "established in the faith" (nkjv). "Established" was a legal term, often used for a binding contract. This too is continuous action, an ongoing process. In these words, Paul might have meant any of three things: (1) that they should become more established (stronger) in their personal faith, (2) that their faith should establish and strengthen them for daily living, or (3) that they should become more established (stronger) in *the* faith, Christianity. The words *as you were taught* indicate that the third option is probably closest to Paul's meaning. Paul wanted the Colossians to be built up and established in order to continue to stand firmly against any false teaching.

The first act of the Christian life is to receive Christ, and every moment afterward we must continue receiving him. The act must become an attitude. Breathe in the love and power of Jesus. Take deep breaths. Then we shall be rooted in him in secret, and built up in him in our outward walk and behavior. If we have Christ, we have all God's fullness What need have we for celestial beings, like those invented by the Gnostics, or for the rite of circumcision, as insisted on by the Jews? We have everything in Jesus.

F. B. Meyer

TRUST: YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW!

Living under the lordship of Christ means realizing that each day brings new opportunities to trust Christ and experience his powerful work in us. Have you trusted this day to Christ?

Trusting Christ	=	Living in vital union with Christ day by day (2:2-7)
Accepting Christ as Head or Lord	=	He is in control (1:15-18; 2:19; 3:10, 17)
Experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit	=	God's mighty energy at work in us (1:11, 28, 29)
Inward and outward results	=	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assurance of forgiveness (2:15) • freedom from evil desires (2:11)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • joy (2:7) • personal growth (1:28) • opportunities to tell others the gospel (1:4, 28) • thankfulness to God (2:7)
Direction	= God becoming involved in our decisions (3:1, 16)

The faith in which these Colossian believers were rooted, built up, and established should be a source of abundant thanksgiving. True understanding of what Christ has done on behalf of believers can lead to no other response than gratefulness. This too ought to characterize believers' faith and walk.

2:8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. The Colossians needed to be on their guard. Paul strongly warned about the heresy's effect on those who believed it. They would be taken *captive*. The word used here means "to kidnap" or "to capture and take away." The false teachers used seductive tactics; the believers had to *see to it* that they didn't allow themselves to let down their guard and be captured intellectually.

THE BEGINNING

Receiving Christ as Lord of your life is the beginning of life with Christ. But you must continue to follow his leadership by being rooted, built up, and strengthened in the faith. Christ wants to guide you and help you with your daily problems. You can live for Christ by (1) committing your life and submitting your will to him (Romans 12:1–2); (2) seeking to learn from him, his life, and his teachings (3:16); and (3) recognizing the Holy Spirit's power in you (Acts 1:8; Galatians 5:22).

According to Paul, the heresy amounted to nothing more than *hollow and deceptive philosophy*. The word translated "philosophy" occurs only here in the New Testament, so this may have been a significant feature of this heresy. In Greek, the word "philosophy" means "love of wisdom." Paul was a gifted philosopher, so he was not condemning education or the study of philosophy. Instead, he was condemning false philosophy, the kind that is deceptive because it keeps people from seeing the truth.

Paul was so disparaging toward this heresy because it was based merely on *human tradition*. Traditions are fine but have little value in a search for the truth. The heresy also was based on *the basic principles of this world*. The Greek phrase *stoikeia tou kosmou* has also been translated "elements of the world" (in Galatians 4:3 nkjv). This phrase (also used in Colossians 2:20) has three main interpretations:

(1) Some have interpreted "basic principles" to refer directly to the law of Moses. This interpretation agrees with Paul's view that the law taken by itself leads only to slavery, but the meaning must be much broader to fit the context of the Colossian believers.

(2) Others have interpreted "basic principles" or "elements" to mean the four basic elements of Greek philosophy—earth, air, fire, and water. Later, these elements became associated with the gods and then with the stars and planets. Many pagan religions (and, at times, the Jewish people) worshiped stars and planets because of their supposed effect on human destiny. This interpretation is also unlikely in this context.

(3) A third, and most likely, interpretation is that these “basic principles” are the elementary stages of religious practice, whether in the Jewish religion, or the rites and rituals in any heathen religion. Paul may have been referring to the local gods worshiped by the pagans across the Roman Empire. Every city had its own deity. In Greek, a deity was called a *daimon* (demon). The source of these deities or demons was the same—Satan. Because the heresy did not come from Christ, it had to have been inspired by Satan in order to “kidnap” people away from the truth.

No man-made religion can lead to the truth, for truth can be found only in Christ. In Christ are hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3 nkjv). No one can come to God except through Christ (John 14:6). True philosophy will focus on Jesus Christ—it will not put Christ in any lower position, nor will it focus on human endeavor.

2:9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. Again Paul asserted Christ’s divine nature (see 1:19). *In Christ* designates a local or spatial relationship rather than a mystical relationship. God’s saving action happens in the person of Jesus Christ. In 2:9–13, every verse contains the phrase “in Christ” (or “in him”) or “with Christ” (or “with him”) to show that Christ is the center of God’s saving activity. *All the fullness of the Deity* refers to the whole total of deity (*pleroma theotaitos*) or all the divine attributes. God’s nature and person are centered in Christ. *Lives in bodily form* means “dwells permanently” or “continues to live” in a human body.

The false teaching said that Christ could not have been both man and God. But Paul clearly stated that this was indeed the case. Paul made two significant points in this sentence: (1) Christ was not another deity along with God; instead, God’s fullness was dwelling uniquely and supremely in Christ. (2) Christ was not less than God. He was not merely one in a hierarchy of angels who would act as intermediaries between people and God. Instead, Paul emphasized to these Colossian believers, and to us today, that when we have Christ, we have everything we need for salvation and right living. He is our leader. No man-made religion or philosophy can give what Christ gives—salvation and right relationship with God.

2:10 And you have come to fullness in him. Not only does all the fullness of the Deity dwell in Christ, but all believers have been given fullness (completeness) in Christ. The Colossians lacked nothing outside of Christ; in him they had everything they needed for salvation and right living. Because they had “received” Christ (2:6) through Paul’s doctrine, the Colossians didn’t need to seek God in other philosophies.

But what does this “completeness” mean? It means that there is nothing lacking in a believer’s relationship with God. God pours his love and power into believers, giving them fullness for this life and readying them for the life to come. Believers need not look anywhere else. Christ is the unique source of knowledge and power for the Christian life. Christ alone holds the answers to the true meaning of life because he *is* life.

FILLING THE GAPS

Look around you. People are searching for something to give their lives a boost. Few people seem content within themselves. A strange and often hard-to-identify inner vacuum gives most people an uneasy sense of incompleteness.

But Christ fills the vacuum. As Jesus’ person is fully divine, so we, united by faith to Jesus, find personal fulfillment in him. We are complete in Christ.

Some days may not feel like it, but, in fact, in Jesus the vacuum is gone; the full power and presence of God has taken up residence in your mind and heart. You are a new person, equipped for life and satisfied in God. So ...

1. Take more risks—God will guide you.

2. Give more generously—God will supply you.
3. Love more freely—God will energize you.
4. Say “can do” more often—God will amaze you.

Who is the head of every ruler and authority. Christ is not just one of many intermediaries or angels who must be worshiped, as the heresy maintained. Instead, he *is the head of every ruler and authority*. Because Christ is the head and is superior to any angel or archangel, it would be absurd to worship or venerate any angel. Believers are part of Christ’s body, the church (1:24), of which Christ is the “head.” Even more than that, Christ is “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:21 niv).

Even today, we must not let curiosity over the nature of angels or any other being in the spirit world cause us to respect, revere, or follow such beings. No spirit guide or intermediary can replace or improve upon what Christ does for us in the Holy Spirit.

2:11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ. Jewish males were circumcised as a sign of the Jews’ covenant with God (Genesis 17:9–14). Circumcision was an expression of Israel’s national identity and was a requirement for all Jewish men. Circumcision (cutting off the foreskin of the penis) was a physical reminder to Jews of their national heritage and privilege. It symbolized “cutting off” the old life of sin, purifying one’s heart, and dedicating oneself to God (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; Ezekiel 44:7).

However, with the death of Christ, bodily circumcision was no longer necessary to be identified as God’s people. Paul explained that all believers *were also circumcised, but not with a circumcision done by the hands of men*. Instead, their circumcision involved *the putting off of the sinful nature*. The phrase “putting off” (from the Greek *apekdysei*, meaning “total breaking away from”) occurs only here in the New Testament and describes a complete break from the old sinful life. “Sinful nature” translates *somatostas sarkos*, literally “the body of the flesh.” This phrase about putting off the body of flesh has two main lines of scholarly interpretation. (1) It could refer to the spiritual work of Christ done on the hearts of believers—the putting off of the old sinful nature (3:9), or (2) it could refer to Christ’s putting off his body of flesh at the Crucifixion, where he died on behalf of believers. This second view seems unlikely because there is no reference to “his” (Christ’s) body being put off. Besides, such a stripping off of the body would support the very teaching that Paul was combating.

The Colossian believers had become God’s children. The sign of their new life was not a cutting of the flesh, but a “cutting off” of the sinful nature. Their commitment to God had been written on their hearts, not on their bodies. Only Christ could perform this circumcision, for only by accepting him as Savior can people be saved. Christ sets people free from their evil desires by a spiritual operation, not a bodily one. He had removed the Colossian believers’ old natures and had given them new ones. *The circumcision done by Christ* was not when he was circumcised as an infant, but when he died on the cross.

2:12 When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. Paul assumed that these Colossian believers had been baptized at conversion and would vividly recall the experience. Paul wrote to the Romans that those who believe in Christ are “baptized into Christ Jesus ... baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3 niv). Baptism parallels the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and it also portrays the death and burial of the believer’s sinful way of life. So how are we buried with Christ in baptism? In the church of Paul’s day, many

people were baptized by immersion—that is, new Christians were completely “buried” in water. They understood this form of baptism to symbolize being buried with Christ, thus the death and burial of the old way of life. When Christ died, our old nature died with him also. This was a spiritual circumcision (2:11). Baptism also portrays the death of our old nature.

Coming up out of the water symbolized resurrection to new life with Christ. It also symbolized the future bodily resurrection. Believers’ faith is in the power of God that raised Christ from the dead, and thus it is faith in the power that will one day raise us from the dead.

This is true freedom! The Colossian believers already possessed it! They didn’t need a false heresy filled with powers and authorities and rituals and practices. All they needed was Christ—and they would be complete in him!

DEAD AND BURIED

Remembering that our old sinful life is dead and buried with Christ gives us a powerful motive to resist sin. Not wanting the desires of our past to come back to power again, we can consciously choose to treat our desires as if they were dead. Then we can continue to enjoy our wonderful new life with Christ (see Galatians 3:27 and Colossians 3:1–4).

2:13 **And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses.** The Colossians were Gentiles, so they were uncircumcised, but that was not the cause of their spiritual death. It was their uncircumcised sinful nature that made them dead in their sins (see 2:11–12). In Deuteronomy 10:16, Moses told the people of Israel to circumcise their hearts. He wanted the people to go beyond physical surgery; they needed to submit to God in their hearts as well as in their bodies. Jeremiah echoed that teaching in Jeremiah 4:4. In Romans 2:29, Paul taught, “real circumcision is a matter of the heart” (nrsv). People were physically alive, but spiritually dead. God’s power had raised Christ from the dead (2:12); he raised the believers from the dead also, because they had been dead in their sins. The Colossians, as Gentiles, had been dead in sin and outside the scope of God’s mercy. What Paul wrote to the Ephesians applies here: “Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12 niv).

FREE TO LIVE

Before we believed in Christ, our nature was evil. We disobeyed, rebelled, and ignored God (even at our best, we did not love him with all our heart, soul, and mind). The Christian, however, has a new nature. God has crucified the old, rebellious nature (Romans 6:6) and has replaced it with a new, loving nature (3:9, 10). The penalty of sin died with Christ on the cross. God has declared us not guilty, and we need no longer live under sin’s power. God does not take us out of the world or make us robots—we will still feel like sinning, and sometimes we will sin. The difference is that before we were saved, we were slaves to our sinful nature; but now we are free to live for Christ (see Galatians 2:20). How are you using your freedom?

To defeat death, God made us alive; to deliver us from sin, he made us alive with Christ. Because God raised Christ, those who belong to Christ are raised as well. God made the Colossian believers *alive together with him*. As opposed to being dead alone in their sin, being alive together with Christ means that believers do not need to live any longer under sin's power. The penalty of sin and its power over believers were miraculously destroyed by Christ on the cross. Through faith in Christ, believers are acquitted, or found not guilty, before God, their judge.

How did this happen? The answer is simple: *He forgave us all our trespasses [sins]*. If our sinful nature caused us to be dead, then that sinful nature had to be dealt with before God could make us alive. The word "forgave" is in the past tense, referring to Christ's work on the cross. God's forgiveness opens the way for believers to experience new life in Christ.

PAID IN FULL

We can enjoy our new life in Christ because we have joined him in his death and resurrection. Our evil desires, our bondage to sin, and our love of sin died with him. Now, joining him in his resurrection life, we may have unbroken fellowship with God and freedom from sin. When you feel weighed down by a load of sin, remember that your debt for sin has been paid in full; your sins are swept away and forgotten by God; and you are clean and new.

2:14 Erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. Paul went on to explain the nature of Christ's forgiveness. In forgiving all our sins (2:13), Christ *erased the record that stood against us*. This record was like a handwritten ledger of our trespasses against the law. Humanity could not pay the debt for these offenses, so God wiped out the record of our sin.

He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. Christ canceled the written record against us by taking the ledger to the cross and nailing it there. In so doing, our debts were canceled; what stood against us can no longer hinder us. Christ set us free by his sacrificial death on the cross. No regulations or human-made rituals can substitute or be added to what Christ has done for us—neither Judaism nor any false teaching can give the salvation that Christ gave. Jesus' death took care of believers' indebtedness to God.

CANCELLED

In 1940, a twenty-one-year-old black man named W. D. Lyons was arrested for a brutal triple murder in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His conviction was based on a coerced confession, and his trial was a farce.

While the truth was never fully determined, the murders were probably committed by organized crime figures, who had framed Lyons because he had a prior criminal record. No court in the country, including the U.S. Supreme Court, had rules sufficient to get at the truth. Lyons was a man caught in a system with no way out.

After twenty-five years in prison, Lyons was released by the governor of Oklahoma using his executive authority. Prison gates opened and Lyons walked free.

Spiritually, we are all left without a defense on a one-way trip into darkness and death. Yet our pardon comes with a promise. God will guide and prosper us in new life in Christ. Not only is our conviction cancelled, but we get power for rebuilding our lives. Make eternal life your wonderful goal and hope.

2:15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Not only did Christ’s death on the cross pay humanity’s debt to God, his death also meant his triumph over the *powers and authorities*.

Who are these “powers and authorities”? Several suggestions have been made, including (1) demonic powers, (2) the gods of the powerful nations, (3) the government of Rome, or even (4) angels (highly regarded by the heretical teachers). Since Paul did not identify who these powers and authorities were, it could be any one of them, or all four. What Christ *disarmed* on the cross was any embodiment of rebellion in the world—whether that be Satan and his demons, false idols of pagan religions (as in 2:16), evil world governments, or even God’s good angels when they become the object of worship (as in the Colossian heresy).

SALVATION THROUGH FAITH

Salvation by faith in Christ sounds too easy for many people. They would rather think that they have done something to save themselves. Their religion becomes one of self-effort that leads either to disappointment or pride, but finally to eternal death. Christ’s simple way is the only way, and it alone leads to eternal life.

	<i>Religion by Self-Effort</i>	<i>Salvation by Faith</i>
Goal	Please God by our own good deeds	Trust in Christ and then live to please God
Means	Practice, diligent service, discipline, and obedience, in hope of reward	Confess, submit, and commit yourself to Christ’s control
Power	Good, honest effort through self-determination	The Holy Spirit in us helps us do good work for Christ’s kingdom
Control	Self-motivation, self-control	Christ in me; I in Christ
Results	Chronic guilt, apathy, depression, failure, constant desire for approval	Joy, thankfulness, love, guidance, service, forgiveness

This “disarming” occurred when Jesus died on the cross. The word for “disarmed” is literally “stripped,” as in stripping a defeated enemy of armor on the battlefield. The powers and authorities of this evil world stripped Christ of his clothing and popularity, made a public spectacle of him on the cross, and triumphed over him by putting him to death. Ironically, the victory belonged to Christ. Actually he stripped the evil powers of their hold on the world, held them up to public contempt, and triumphed over them by taking his rightful power and position.

Evil no longer has any power over believers because Christ has disarmed it. Paul already had told the Colossians, “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (1:13 niv). As a triumphant Roman general would lead a procession of captives and booty gained in a great victory, so Christ had turned his captors into captives, displaying them in his victory procession. The Colossians, too, had participated in that victory. We also must not act as helpless slaves to the heresy of false teachers; instead, we should proclaim the truth and victory of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

FREEDOM FROM LEGALISM / 2:16–23

Paul wondered aloud in this section why the Colossian believers would choose to return from freedom to slavery. Why were they living as if they belonged to the world? Why should they submit to these rules? Paul was not speaking of all rules and regulations, but of those that were rooted in rebellion against God, rules that were self-serving rather than God-honoring. Such regulations only served to enslave people. Believers must never set aside freedom in order to follow a series of negative rules and regulations regarding every facet of life. We died with Christ; he has set us free.

2:16 **Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.** Because Christ had canceled the written code (2:14) and had disarmed evil powers (2:15), believers have been set free from legalistic rules about what they eat or drink or what festivals they observe. Although it is most likely that Paul was referring to Jewish laws about diet and festival observances, pagan food laws and celebrations, or a combination of the two, cannot be excluded as a possibility. Some Greek philosophies promoted fasting in order to prepare for a vision. In any case, Paul's point was that the believers should not give up their freedom for legalism. They must not let anyone *condemn* them by saying that certain actions would exclude them from God's people. If the Colossians submitted to any of the regulations imposed by the false teachers, they would be saying that evil powers still held authority over them. They needed to remember that Christ had set them free.

FOCUS ON FAITH

Paul told the Colossian Christians not to let others criticize their diet or their religious ceremonies. Instead of outward observance, believers should focus on faith in Christ alone. Our worship, traditions, and ceremonies can help bring us close to God, but we should never criticize fellow Christians whose traditions and ceremonies differ from ours. More important than how we worship is that we worship Christ. Don't be discouraged if others judge you. Remember that you are responsible to Christ.

2:17 **These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.** Paul did not condemn the keeping of some Old Testament dietary laws or observing some of the celebrations. Instead, he condemned doing so in order to somehow earn credit with God. The Old Testament laws, holidays, and feasts were *a shadow of the things that were to come*. In the analogy of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, Plato distinguished between the shadow (outward appearance) and reality (inward spiritual truth). But Paul was using "shadow" in the sense of foreshadowing. The law pointed to the future—to Christ. Anything that is not Christ or found in Christ is, by contrast, a shadow or unreal. At one time these laws were needed as God prepared a nation for himself. These people would be keepers of his laws and ancestors of his Son. The ceremonial and civil regulations of Judaism set God's people apart from the world. Through Christ, however, God was preparing a new people for himself—a worldwide family. What the Old Testament promised, Christ fulfilled. If we have Christ, we have what we need in order to know and please God.

2:18 **Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.** By turning the Colossian believers away from the reality back to the shadow, the false teachers served only to *disqualify* the believers. Paul did not mean that the believers would lose their salvation, but that they would lose their *prize* (that is, their rewards; see also 1 Corinthians 3:10–15).

Some versions say that the false teachers were “insisting on self-abasement” (nrsv), meaning that not only did they enjoy their pretense of humility, but they also attempted to impose it on the Colossian believers. The false humility, revealed by self-abasement and self-denial, came from observances of rituals and regulations that had no bearing on salvation. This sort of humility was self-absorbing and self-gratifying, a kind of pretentious piety.

TRUE WORTH

The false teachers were proud of their humility! This false humility brought attention and praise to the teachers rather than to God. True humility means seeing ourselves as we really are—from God’s perspective—and then acting accordingly. Today, people practice false humility when they talk negatively about themselves so that others will think they are spiritual. Humility is a Christian virtue, but true Christian humility comes from realizing that our only worth is due to Christ’s intervention on our behalf. False humility is self-centered; true humility is God-centered.

In addition, these teachers’ false humility said that the people could not approach God directly—he could be approached only through various levels of angels. They taught, therefore, that people had to worship angels in order to eventually reach God. This is unscriptural; the Bible teaches that angels are God’s servants and it forbids worshipping them (Exodus 20:3–4; Revelation 19:9–10; 22:8–9). No amount of fascination with angels should overshadow the majesty of Christ.

DISCONNECTED

This picture of the body—all Jesus’ followers united in the church—portrays dynamic growth; it is not static, not standing still. Anyone who becomes disconnected from Christ stops growing and loses the ability to discern the truth.

If you’re disconnected, you may be getting more confused (or unthinkingly rigid) every day. Consider the consequences: At its extremes, such disconnection causes people to justify killing doctors in the name of saving unborn babies. More typically, the disconnection makes us soft on issues like sexual fidelity, truth telling, and respect for others.

If you’re losing momentum and you need to get connected again to Jesus, do it today. Pray with a Christian friend and let God know it’s time you got on the move.

Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. The false teachers took great pride in what they had seen in visions—most likely these were part of an initiation rite that climaxed in some sort of vision that supposedly revealed great secrets of the universe. These visions caused division because only an elite few could experience them. This only puffed up the false teachers with all kinds of interpretations and ideas that Paul dismissed as *idle notions* because their minds were not centered on Christ; they were *unspiritual* (see Romans 8:5–10). While the false teachers may have thought that they had a “corner on God,” their thoughts and actions betrayed a mere human origin. Their desire for attention from others showed that, in reality, they were obsessed with and

controlled by the physical realm. They were putting their confidence in their visions and rule keeping, and not in Christ.

2:19 He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. The fundamental problem with the false teachers was that they were not connected to Christ, the Head of the body of believers. If they had been joined to him, they would not have taught false doctrine or lived immorally. The false teachers had become detached from Christ. Just as a limb that is detached from the body loses life, so these false teachers, detached from the body of Christ and no longer under his headship, had lost the most vital connection. By losing connection with Christ, the natural result was that these teachers would fall into error and find themselves separated from the church.

Spiritual “judges” were not connected with Jesus or with his body. If they truly held fast to him, they would not be worried about human regulations. The *ligaments and sinews*, by connecting all the members of the body to one another, allow the power to grow (which comes from the head) to reach all the body. The Greek medical ideas behind this imagery stressed that the head supplied energy and nourishment to the body by means of the joints and ligaments. Along with the muscles, these were the supply channels to the body. The body of Christ can only grow when the believers are connected to one another under Christ (see also 1 Corinthians 12:12–31; Ephesians 4:15–16). Using a similar analogy, Jesus had told his disciples, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 nkjv).

TRUST GOD FOR A CHANGE

People should be able to see a difference between the way Christians and non-Christians live. Still, we should not expect instant maturity in new Christians. Christian growth is a lifelong process. Although we have a new nature, we don’t automatically think all good thoughts and have all pure attitudes when we become new people in Christ. But if we keep listening to God, we will be changing all the time. As you look over the last year, what positive changes have you seen in your thoughts and attitudes? Change may be slow, but your life will change significantly if you trust God to change you.

2:20–21 Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? Believers have died with Christ and are no longer under the power of *the basic principles of this world*—the evil spirits and demonic powers that work against Christ (see commentary on 2:8). When Christ died, he “disarmed the powers and authorities” (2:15). Believers have died with Christ; thus, they are no longer under the control of those powers and authorities. Their “death” released them from their previous slavery. Paul wondered, somewhat incredulously, why these Colossian believers would even think about submitting themselves to a conquered power. (The verb implies not a reprimand for having done something, but a warning against doing it.)

2:22 All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. *These regulations* (referring to the commands not to handle, taste, or touch in 2:21) focused on rule keeping that had nothing to do with God’s holy laws. The focus was on how well a person could keep the rules and then congratulate himself or herself for rule keeping. There were two problems with this: (1) These were physical laws, from the world, dealing with things that could be tasted and

touched and would therefore eventually *perish with use*. In these words we hear an echo of Christ when he explained to the Pharisees: “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.... Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Matthew 15:11, 17 nrsv).

(2) These were *human commands and teachings*. The false teachers were attempting to teach as doctrine their own ideas; they were placing their regulations and rules on level with God’s commands; they were trying to make their regulations a condition of God’s grace. They were wrong on all counts. Again we hear an echo of Christ speaking to the Pharisees, “You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines’ ” (Matthew 15:7, 9 nrsv).

CAN’T REACH HIGH ENOUGH

We cannot reach up to God by following rules of self-denial, by observing rituals, or by practicing religion. Paul wasn’t teaching that all rules are bad. But no keeping of laws or rules will earn salvation. The good news is that God reaches down to human beings, and he asks for our response. Human-made religions focus on human effort; Christianity focuses on Christ’s work. Believers must put aside sinful desires, but doing so is the by-product of our new life in Christ, not the reason for our new life. Depend on the power of Christ’s death and resurrection for salvation, not on your own discipline and rule keeping.

2:23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. To the Colossians, the discipline demanded by the false teachers seemed good. Actually, forms of legalism still attract many people today. Following a long list of religious rules requires strong self-discipline and can make a person appear sagacious and spiritual. But such people are empty shells, giving only *an appearance of wisdom*. True wisdom is found only in Christ, the source of all wisdom. *Self-imposed worship* refers to human-made religion that, by its very nature, cannot focus on Christ (2:18–19). Thus it does not honor God. The *humility* supposedly shown by these rule-keeping ascetics was false humility. In reality, their ability to keep the rules and their *harsh treatment of the body* as they attempted to carry out the regulations caused them to be proud and to place themselves above others. But all this piety and asceticism was worthless. No amount of religious rules can change a person’s heart; they have no value in *restraining sensual indulgence*. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. It is important to note that it is not just sensual indulgence (as niv translates it), but self-indulgence of any kind.

Therefore, all human attempts at religion are worthless. By extension, then, the heresy with all its positive-sounding rules was also worthless.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

We can guard against human-made religions by asking these questions about any religious group:

- Does it stress human-made rules and taboos rather than God’s grace?
- Does it foster a critical spirit toward others, or does it exercise discipline discreetly and lovingly?
- Does it stress formulas, secret knowledge, or special visions more than the Word of God?
- Does it elevate self-righteousness, honoring those who keep the rules, rather than elevating Christ?
- Does it neglect Christ’s universal church, claiming to be an elite group?

- Does it teach humiliation of the body as a means to spiritual growth rather than focusing on the growth of the whole person?
- Does it disregard the family rather than holding it in high regard as the Bible does?

Life Application Bible Commentary Barton, B. B., & Comfort, P. W. (1995). [*Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*](#) (pp. 195–202). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.