

**COLOSSIANS:
MORE THAN ENOUGH**

LESSON FIVE

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

COLOSSIANS 2:16-19

Douglas Moo, in the *Pillar Commentary*, explains how the false teachers in Colossae were attempting to disqualify the Colossian believers:

16 The *therefore* at the beginning of v. 16 connects the theology about “fullness in Christ” in vv. 10–15 with Paul’s exhortation to resist the false teachers in this verse and following. Because it is in Christ that you have spiritual fullness, Paul is saying, do not let anyone impose upon you a program of spiritual development that does not have Christ at its heart. Turning to specifics, Paul begins by warning the Colossians: *Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.* Paul’s use of the singular *anyone* (*tis*) might indicate that he has a particular prominent false teacher in view. However the singular is more likely simply generic (see our comments on v. 8). *Judge*, like its Greek equivalent (*krino*), can have a neutral—“he judged that it was time to go”—or negative connotation—“she judged him for his false conduct.” The word here is clearly negative, paralleled by being “taken captive” in v. 8 and being “disqualified” in v. 18. The latter parallel in particular could suggest that Paul means not just that the false teachers were “criticizing” the Colossian Christians (cf. NJB and REB) but that they were pronouncing God’s judgment on them. The latter idea might find support from a passage that has many parallels with vv. 16–23, Romans 14:1–15:7. Paul there chastises the “strong in faith” for “judging” their brothers and sisters, noting that it is before God’s judgment seat that all must eventually stand (14:10). This passage implies that some Christians were taking upon themselves the role of judge that only God can exercise (see also Jas. 4:11–12). Perhaps the rendering “pass judgment” (RSV; ESV; NAB) best captures the sense.

Paul enumerates two sets of issues on the basis of which the false teachers are “passing judgment”: food and drink, and the observance of special religious days. These are also just the matters dividing the “strong” and the “weak” in the Roman community (Rom. 14:2, 5). And in both passages, there is considerable debate about the source of such regulations. While Paul does not directly say so here, his reference to “rules” such as “do not handle” and “do not taste” (vv. 20–21) make it clear that the false teachers were advocating abstinence from some kinds of food and drink. Similarly, it is virtually certain that the teachers were advocating (rather than, e.g., criticizing) observance of special days. Our text gives no information about just what foods or kinds of drink were being prohibited. (In Romans 14–15, the “weak” were avoiding meat [14:2] and perhaps also wine [14:21].) The Old Testament law, of course, prohibits the eating of certain food deemed “unclean,” but it does not generally prohibit any kind of drinking. However, both the Old Testament and Judaism reveal that many Jews living in Gentile environments chose to abstain from all meat and wine in order to avoid possible ritual contamination.¹²⁴ This is probably the rationale for the prohibitions in Romans 14–15, and, with explicit allusion to Jewish festivals later in this verse, it is natural to think that it is the same here. And the “shadow”/“reality” comparison of v. 17 also points to a probable contrast between Old Testament and New. Nevertheless, what is missing in Colossians, in comparison with Romans, is any direct reference to the Mosaic law or to divisions between Jews and Gentiles. These omissions are especially significant in light of the fact that Paul explicitly mentions just these matters in some passages in Ephesians that are closely parallel to ones in Colossians (cf. esp. Col. 1:24–29 with Eph. 3:1–13 and 2:14–15 with Eph. 2:11–22). We should therefore at least keep open the possibility that the Colossian false teachers’ abstinence from food and drink had its origins elsewhere, since many ancient Greco-Roman philosophical and religious traditions also featured prohibitions of meat and wine.

An Old Testament/Jewish derivation for the false teachers’ insistence on keeping certain religious “days” is much more likely. The threefold *religious festival* (*heorte*), *New Moon celebration* (*neomenia*), and *Sabbath day* (*sabbaton*) is common in the Old Testament (e.g., 1 Chr. 23:31; 2 Chr. 2:3; 31:3; Ezek. 45:17; Hos. 2:13); and “Sabbath,” while occasionally observed by Gentiles, is, of course, a distinctly Jewish phenomenon. In the Old Testament, “festivals” include both the annual “pilgrimage” festivals (Passover/Unleavened Bread; Booths, or Tabernacles; and Weeks/Firstfruits) and other special times of community observance.¹²⁹ But the New Testament elsewhere uses the word to refer

COMMENTARY NOTES

to the annual pilgrimage festivals, so that is probably the referent here also.

Although there is, then, universal agreement that the false teachers' insistence on observance of days was influenced by Judaism, dispute remains over the degree and nature of that influence. Some interpreters think that the false teachers were representing what we might call a "mainstream" Jewish viewpoint. Noting the importance of the observance of special days in the Dead Sea Scrolls, others have thought that a "sectarian" Jewish viewpoint such as found at Qumran might be the background. Most interpreters, however, persist in thinking that the false teachers had integrated the observance of Jewish special days into a larger syncretistic system. As Lohse, a good representative of the view, puts it, "The 'philosophy' made use of terms which stemmed from Jewish tradition, but which had been transformed in the crucible of syncretism to be subject to the service of 'the elements of the universe.'" A decision among these options is difficult, although influence from Qumran, since the community observed a solar-based calendar, might be unlikely.¹³⁴ The Old Testament—derived language, the "shadow"/"reality" comparison of v. 17, and allusions elsewhere in the passage to Jesus' teaching on ritual cleanness (see v. 22) certainly favor a strong Jewish element in the false teaching. Moreover, Lohse's claim that the false teachers observed these days "in service of 'the elements of the universe'" is an inference, not a sure conclusion (despite the fact that it is repeated in many commentaries). It presumes, perhaps, a definition of these "elements" in terms of "astral spirits" that we have questioned (see v. 8), and it does not necessarily distance the teaching from Judaism, since Paul brings the Jewish law and the "elements" together in Galatians 4 (vv. 3, 9). On the other hand, as we have noted, specific references to the law and Judaism, such as we might have expected had the false teaching been purely (or even mainly) Jewish, are lacking in our text. Furthermore, v. 18 suggests practices that are more likely to stem from broader religious traditions in the region of Colossae. On the whole, then, it seems best to view the practices in v. 16 as basically Jewish in origin and perhaps even orientation while still recognizing that they have been taken up into a larger mix of religious ideas and practices.

One implication of this larger discussion for the application of our passage is the continuing role of Sabbath observance within the Christian church. A casual reading of this verse would suggest that Sabbath observance is treated as entirely optional: one must not judge another Christian over it. But a number of interpreters argue that this kind of reading fails to reckon with the context in which the Sabbath is being observed in our passage. Only Sabbath observance that is connected inappropriately to a wider religious viewpoint is here being condemned. These interpreters are quite right to emphasize the importance of interpreting contextually and historically. And they are also right, we have suggested, to argue that Sabbath was taken up into a larger, syncretistic mix.

But there is still reason to think that Paul calls into question here Sabbath observance per se. The language and logic of v. 17 suggest that the primary problem with Sabbath observance was a failure to reckon with the "fulfillment" of such institutions in the new era of salvation. As Lincoln puts it, "That Paul without any qualification can relegate Sabbaths to shadows certainly indicates that he does not see them as binding and makes it extremely unlikely that he could have seen the Christian first day as a continuation of the Sabbath." In a way similar, then, to Romans 14:5, Colossians 2:16 can validly be used, we think, to conclude that the observance of a Sabbath day is no longer a requirement of God's people in the new realm.

17 Paul does not explicitly connect v. 17 to v. 16 (there is no conjunction in Greek). Thus TNIV, along with most versions, has a new sentence begin in this verse. But the logical relationship between the two verses is clear enough: it is wrong for anyone to pass judgment on someone else over the matters mentioned in v. 16, *because* these matters are only the "shadow" of the reality that Christians now find in Christ. The pronoun *these* (translating the Greek relative pronoun *ha*) refers to the prohibitions of food and drink and the observances of special days in v. 16. In referring to them (collectively) as *a shadow*, Paul taps into a popular Hellenistic image with its roots in Greek philosophical speculation. Plato had famously used the contrast of "shadow" and "substance," or "reality" to compare the material realities to their corresponding "ideals." The distinction was taken up in a variety of ways in Hellenistic thinking. The comparison was usually between "shadow" (*skia*) and "form" or "image" (*eikon*), but it could also be expressed, as Paul does here, as a contrast

COMMENTARY NOTES

between “shadow” and “substance” (*soma*). A good example of the general contrast, utilizing just these terms, is found in the Jewish philosopher Philo, who spoke of the “letter” of the Old Testament as the “shadow,” while his own allegorical interpretations were the “substance,” the “higher values ... [that] really and truly exist” (*On the Confusion of Tongues* 190). In Hellenistic philosophy, the contrast of “shadow”/“substance” was often, as in the Philo text, a contrast between appearance and reality.

But Paul, like the author to the Hebrews, who applies the same contrast in a similar way (Heb. 10:1), uses popular language to convey a historically oriented contrast between one era and another. He signals this orientation with the phrase *that were to come*, which refers to those realities that have now come in Christ but were still to come from the perspective of the original institutions. According to the fundamental salvation-historical perspective of the New Testament writers, the Old Testament, and especially the law, belonged to the time of promise, to the time when God was preparing his people and the world for salvation in Christ. With the coming of Christ, the new era of fulfillment has dawned. The old era and the law have now been brought to their “culmination” (Rom. 10:4). Believers who belong to the new era through their incorporation into Christ therefore experience the reality to which the Old Testament and its law pointed. And they are no longer compelled to follow the laws of that earlier era. The Colossian Christians should not let anyone insist on their observing the rules and ceremonies of the earlier era that has now passed. As we noted in our comments on v. 16, then, Paul’s use of this particular imagery makes clear that he views the “things” of v. 16 as having positive value. This makes sense if the rules about eating and observance of days are based on the Old Testament law, but it would be most unusual for Paul to accord such a stature to rules derived from pagan religion.

As we noted above, ancient writers typically used the word “form” in contrast to “shadow.” Paul, however, chooses to use the word *soma*. This word can be translated “reality” or “substance,” but, of course, more often is translated “body.” And since Paul uses this word in Colossians to refer to Christ’s own body (1:22) and to the “body” of the church (1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15), it is often thought that he has chosen to use this particular word to convey a theological point, namely, that the “substance” to which the shadow pointed is the Christian church. “The reality which exists solely with Christ is shared only by those who, as members of the body of Christ, adhere to the head.” NJB tries to capture the dual meaning by translating *soma* twice: “the reality is the body of Christ.” Lending some support to this interpretation is the particular phraseology that Paul has used. He does not straightforwardly say that “the substance *is* Christ” but that “the substance is *of Christ or belongs to Christ*” (see ESV; NASB). Certainly Paul draws attention to the “body” of Christ, the church, in this context (v. 19). On the other hand, as we have seen, *soma* was sometimes contrasted with “shadow,” and we should respect the general linguistic principle that discourages double meanings unless the context makes it pretty clear. The context here is suggestive but not decisive. We conclude, then, that an allusion to the church is possible but not clearly established.

18 This verse furnishes the most important evidence about the false teaching, but it is also arguably the most difficult verse in Colossians to interpret. The beginning and the end of the verse are clear enough. As he did in v. 16, Paul again urges the Colossians not to let *anyone* stand in judgment over them. The translation *disqualify* in the TNIV (and also ESV; NRSV; HCSB; REB; NAB) reflects the use of certain forms of the Greek word used here to refer to the negative verdict of an umpire in an athletic contest. But the evidence for this particular nuance of the word group in Paul’s day is not overly strong; the basic verb seemed most often simply to mean “judge” (see Col. 3:15). Therefore it is likely that the stronger form of the verb here means “judge against,” for example, “condemn” (NLT; cf. NET).

The bulk of the verse is made up of three descriptions of the false teachers. The last one is clear enough: *their unspiritual minds puff them up with idle notions*. “Puff up” translates a verb that occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in 1 Corinthians (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4). Its basic meaning, “blow up, inflate” (as one might blow up a bellows), suits it beautifully to express the idea of arrogance. The arrogance of the false teachers expressed itself in their arrogating to themselves the right to stand in judgment over others. Such arrogance, Paul asserts, has no basis in the facts:

COMMENTARY NOTES

it is “without reason” (ESV),¹⁴⁶ and it originates in their *unspiritual minds*. “Unspiritual” translates *sarx* (often “flesh”), which Paul uses here in his typical fashion to refer to that which belongs to this world and which therefore often fails to take into consideration the truth of the “spiritual” realm. It is possible that these false teachers—as false teachers often do—were taking on intellectual airs, priding themselves on their superior “minds.” Paul’s characterization would then be directly polemical: they have minds, alright, but minds that are thoroughly oriented to this world rather than to the next.¹⁴⁸

Paul says two other things about these people who arrogantly claim to stand in judgment over others: they *delight[s] in false humility and the worship of angels* and they *go into great detail about what they have seen*. The verb translated in TNIV as “delight in” (see also NASB; NET; NAB) can also be translated “insist on” (e.g., ESV; NLT; HCSB). The latter has in its favor a slightly more natural connection with the main verb: “Don’t let anyone condemn you by insisting that you....” However, the lexical evidence for the verb (*thelo*, “will, “wish”) favors the TNIV rendering.¹⁵¹ The meaning “delight in” for this verb reflects a Hebrew phrase that has this sense: for example, “the king has delight in you” (1 Sam. 18:22, ESV).¹⁵² Paul does not then say that the false teachers are trying to force the Colossians to adopt the practices he refers to here (although it may be implied). He simply describes what it is that the false teachers themselves are delighting in.

The first of these is *false humility*, the TNIV interpretive rendering of a word in Greek that means simply “humility.” The New Testament generally speaks positively of this virtue (e.g., Col. 3:12), but it is clear in this context that Paul does not think the false teachers’ interest in “humility” is a good thing. The TNIV rendering *false humility* suggests that the problem is attitudinal: the false teachers, like Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*, pretend to a humility that they don’t really feel. Another option, however, is that the word connotes ascetic practices, especially fasting (cf. ESV, “asceticism”; HCSB, “ascetic practices”; and NASB, “self-abasement”). Several texts connect “humility” with fasting,¹⁵³ and Paul has just referred to the false teachers’ concern with what they eat and drink (v. 16). Moreover, Paul may refer to the false teachers’ interest in visionary experiences later in the verse (*what they have seen*), and fasting was often encouraged as a means of preparing for visions. A direct reference to fasting per se is probably too specific, since there is no evidence that the word Paul uses here (or its cognates) could, by itself, refer to fasting. But the context (see v. 23) does suggest that the word refers in general to ascetic practices that the false teachers may have used to prepare themselves for or to stimulate visionary experiences.

The second thing in which the false teachers take delight is *the worship of angels*. This English rendering most naturally suggests that the false teachers were involved in worshipping angels; and this has been the traditional understanding of the phrase. But the phrase could also mean (in Greek, perhaps, more easily than in English) “worship that the angels are offering,” and this view of the passage has gained considerable popularity in recent years.¹⁵⁶ According to this interpretation, the false teachers are seeking to join with the angels in the worship of God. Such a participation with angels in the worship of God in heaven features in many Jewish mystical and apocalyptic writings. This interpretation, it is argued, fits well into the context, which seems to focus on visionary experience.

However, the more traditional interpretation should probably be preferred. First, from a purely linguistic point of view, the phrase is more likely to mean “worship offered to angels” than “worship offered by angels.”¹⁵⁸ Second, while many Jewish apocalyptic texts refer to angelic worship, and some refer to humans observing or imitating that worship, very few speak of humans joining with angels in such worship. It is questionable, in other words, whether the simple (and very ambiguous) phrase “worship of angels” would have been capable of connoting such a relatively rare concept. Third, as we have noted, a key concern of Colossians has been to accentuate the superiority of Christ over spiritual beings (1:16, 20; 2:10, 15). Such a concern to minimize the significance of the angels would make very good sense if, indeed, the false teachers were worshipping them. Fourth, Clinton Arnold has suggested a plausible background for Paul’s accusation that the false teachers were worshipping angels. He notes the importance of invoking angels as a means to ward off evil in the ancient world in general and the geographic region of Colossae in particular. Paul would be characterizing this calling on angels for protection as tantamount to the worship of angels.¹⁶¹

COMMENTARY NOTES

Debate about the precise shape of the false teaching continues as we come to the final description of the false teachers in this verse (the second participle in the series): *Such people go into great detail about what they have seen*. The TNIV translation reflects an interpretation adopted by most of the other English versions. It takes the verb “go into” (*embateuo*) in a metaphorical sense, “go into detail about” (see ESV), and construes *ha heoraken* as a relative clause dependent on it, “which things he/she has seen.” This latter phrase is then taken to refer to “things seen” in a vision. On this view, the false teachers are “hung up on” the visions that they have been receiving, relating them endlessly to anyone who would listen and perhaps bragging about them as well (see the end of v. 18).

But there are two important alternatives to this view. The first rests on a technical meaning of the verb “enter” (*embateuo*). There is evidence that this word was associated with “entry” into the sanctuary where the very popular mystery religions were celebrated. Visions were often associated with the experience of the worshiper in these sanctuaries. So the whole phrase could mean “which things he/she has seen when entering [the sanctuary]”: that is, the false teachers have had visions of ascetic practices and angel worship when they participated in the mystery rites. But there are two problems with this view. The first is whether we have enough evidence to think that Paul would be using the verb “enter” in such a specific way.¹⁶⁵ The other problem is whether it makes sense to see ascetic practices and angel worship as the object of visions. The second alternative view at least partially answers both of these objections. It takes “enter” to mean “enter into heaven” (in a vision) and “which things he/she has seen” to refer especially to visions of the angels’ “humility” and worship. But this view also has its problems. The plural relative pronoun (*ha*; “what”) implies that Paul must be referring both to angelic worship and to “[ascetic] humility”; but it is difficult to see how the ascetic practices preceding a vision could be the object of the vision itself. And, second, of course, we have argued against taking “worship of angels” to mean worship conducted by the angels. On the whole, then, and in spite of relatively sparse support from recent commentators, we are inclined to follow the interpretation represented in most of the translations: the false teachers, Paul claims, are recounting in great detail the things they have seen in their visions.

To summarize this difficult verse, then, we find Paul to be asserting four things about the false teachers: (1) they put a great deal of stock in ascetic practices, perhaps to induce visions; (2) they are so concerned with calling on angels as a means of protection from evil forces that they are virtually worshipping them; (3) they focus on visions they have experienced, perhaps citing the content of those visions in their teaching; and (4) they display, perhaps because of their boasting about visions, an arrogance that reveals a worldly orientation. Placing a label on the general viewpoint that encompasses these characteristics is impossible, partly because our information is so tantalizingly unspecific and partly because there were so many possible religious currents and crosscurrents in the Colossian context. Perhaps the best option, however, is the kind of folk religion that Arnold presents in his important monograph: a syncretistic mix that draws from various religious sources in the environment of Colossae (including, certainly, Judaism).

19 As we noted in the introduction to this paragraph, vv. 16–23 elaborate the basic points Paul made about the false teachers in v. 8. Structural similarities between that verse and vv. 18–19 are particularly close. In both texts Paul’s main point is a warning not to succumb to the false teachers’ program: “See to it that no one takes you captive”; “Do not let anyone ... disqualify you.” In both passages Paul justifies this warning by first describing the false teaching/false teachers: it is “a hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world”; they pride themselves on ascetic practices and worship angels. And in both texts Paul clinches his case against the false teachers by accusing them of not depending on Christ, “the head” (cf. v. 10).

In the Greek text, vv. 18–19 comprise one sentence, governed by an imperative with four participles: “Let no one disqualify you ... delighting in ... going into great detail ... puffed up ... not holding onto” (this structure is preserved in NASB and ESV). For ease of reading in English, TNIV has divided this sentence into three, without, however, changing the sense of the text (most English versions do something like this).¹⁶⁸ *They have lost connection with the head* probably implies, as we noted earlier, that the false teaching has arisen from within the larger Christian community. This conclusion is disputed by some, who note that the verb Paul uses here could be translated “grasp,” “seize,” and

COMMENTARY NOTES

that Paul might therefore be criticizing the false teachers for failing to “come to grips” with Christ (note NJB: “such a person has no connection with the Head”). But most commentators, as well as the English versions, rightly decide that the verb in this context must mean “hold onto,” “adhere to.”¹⁷¹ The false teachers were apparently professing Christians, who, because of their preoccupation with rules and spiritual beings and visions, had lost contact with the only effective source of spiritual growth. Working from a metaphor that Paul has introduced earlier in Colossians (1:18; 2:10), Paul calls Christ *the head* (capitalized in ESV; NJB because it is taken as a title).

As the rest of this verse indicates, the metaphor of the human body governs Paul’s imagery here. As we noted in our comments on 1:18, many ancient writers used the analogy of the physical body, and particularly the head-body relationship, applying it to a wide variety of subjects. Since the head was considered to be the animating and directing part of the body, the analogy would usually connote either authority, or empowerment, or both. Christ’s authority is the focus in 2:10, but in 1:18 and here probably both the ideas of authority and of “source of provision” are in view. Christ is the authority to whom the church should look for its rules and commandments and the one who empowers its members to grow spiritually. For it is Christ, our “head,” *from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow*. There has been some discussion about the exact denotation of the Greek words translated in TNIV as “ligaments” and “sinews” (note ESV, “joints and ligaments”). In general, however, it appears that both terms referred to the small “bands” or “fasteners” that connected the parts of the body. “Ligaments,” the tissue that connects bones to other bones within the joint, and “sinews,” the tissue that connects muscles to bones (also “tendons”), are therefore appropriate English renderings. It makes perfect sense, then, for Paul to say that these parts “support” and “hold together” the body. The latter translation is quite appropriate, the word Paul uses suggesting the idea of something being “joined” or “knit” together.¹⁷⁵ The other word that Paul uses (*epichoregeo*) means “make provision for,” “furnish,” and many commentators conclude that it must refer to the nourishment supplied by the ligaments and sinews to the body (see ESV; NRSV; HCSB). Of course, this strains to the breaking point the underlying analogy, since ligaments and sinews do not function this way. But writers frequently use such analogies with considerable freedom, so this is not an insuperable problem. Nevertheless, the idea of “support” in the sense of “provide support for the body” is probably within the semantic range of this verb, and should probably be preferred. Note also the parallel text in Ephesians, where Paul uses the cognate noun: “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting (*epichoregias*) ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

However we take Paul’s language about the ligaments and the sinews, it is probable that he introduces the imagery here to suggest the same point he explicitly makes in the Ephesians text: the body of Christ grows as its members, or parts, support and learn from each other. And, of course, Paul’s more extensive use of the “body”/“members” metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 significantly develops this point. At the same time, Paul’s main point here is not how the members facilitate growth but how the ultimate source of the body’s growth is Christ, its head. It is through him that the body *grows as God causes it to grow*. The “growth” Paul has in view here is probably the growth in maturity of the existing “members” of the body rather than the growth of the body by the addition of new members.¹⁷⁷ For it is the matter of how individual believers find spiritual “fullness” that is the precipitating issue in the letter. Identifying both Christ—“from whom”—and God as the source of the body’s growth is typical of the way that Paul associates the work of the Father and the Son in his conception of the Christian life.¹

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 218-232.

COMMENTARY NOTES

COLOSSIANS 2:20–23

N. T. Wright, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, comments on Paul's assessment of the Colossian heresy:

20. This final appeal, like the earlier ones in the chapter, is grounded in that reality which is true of the Colossians because they belong to Christ (2:11ff.). Christ, by his death, came out from under the apparent dominion which the 'powers' had exercised over him. Those who are his have therefore already emerged from that old tyranny. This is expressed in the words since (literally 'if': but this is the 'if,' not of doubt, but of logic) you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world. Death releases people from their previous status: the idea here is similar to Paul's expressions elsewhere about dying 'to the law'. Here the 'death' which the Colossians have already undergone is 'out from under' (perhaps the most literal way of reading *apo*, more simply interpreted as 'to' in NIV, RSV) the rule of the 'principles' or 'elements', mentioned already in verse 8.

The 'elements' and their characteristic regulations are 'of the world': why, then, as though you still belonged to it (i.e. the world), do you submit to its rules? In the light of the whole passage, it would be better to translate the verb as passive, not middle, seeing the sentence not as a rebuke for a lapse but as a warning of danger ('why should you allow yourselves to be subjected to its rules?', cf. *av*). The meaning of 'rules' is defined by its context. It is not a warning against just any regulations at all, as has sometimes been implied, but against those that 'belong to the world'—which carries with it the overtones of rebellion against God, much like 'the present evil age' (cf. Gal. 1:4) as opposed to 'the age to come'. At the same time, Paul is preparing for the point (to be spelt out in vv. 21–22) that these regulations betray their irrelevance for true holiness by dealing with physical things only, instead of with physical things in their full context.

21. It hardly needs to be said that this verse is a contemptuous reference to the sort of regulations Paul is opposing, not a statement of his own views. NIV has, in fact, brought this out by putting quotation marks round the three prohibitions, and a question mark at the end of the verse. The verb here translated 'handle'⁴⁵ is stronger than that rendered 'touch', thus producing a downward sliding scale (Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!) which corresponds to the upward rise in absurd scrupulosity. Examples of this sort of regulation are not difficult to find in the Judaism roughly contemporary with Paul. There is no reason either to look to pagan sources or to imagine that only when one has found a religion which said exactly what Paul here says has the correct background been located. The tone throughout the passage has been heavily ironic, and this continues to the end of the chapter.

22. The two arguments here advanced against regulations of this sort are so close to those found on the lips of Jesus in Matthew 15:1–20 and Mark 7:1–23 that many scholars have suggested a conscious echo on Paul's part. This may be judged probable whether or not the Colossians would have picked up such a reference. The first argument, these are all destined to perish with use, highlights the futility of regulations dealing with materials—i.e. foodstuffs—whose proper use is also their destruction (cf. 1 Cor. 6:13). 'Perish with use' does not just mean 'may wear out in time', but indicates that 'the things could not be used without rendering them unfit for further use'. The second argument, because they are based on human commands or teachings, refers, like Matthew 15:9, to Isaiah 29:13, where the prophet condemns his contemporaries for their heartless outward show of religion. *niv* seems to imply, with its addition of 'because' to the Greek original, that this clause is supposed to be the reason why foodstuffs will perish with use, but this is clearly absurd. The two clauses stand in parallel, both commenting independently on the regulations mocked in verse 21.

23. The Greek of the last verse of chapter 2 is sufficiently odd for several sober-minded commentators to suggest that, despite the absence of manuscript variations, scribal corruption has occurred at an early stage in transmission. Against this it must be said that any manuscript which offered an easy way out of the problems of verse 23 would instantly become suspect for just that reason; scribes are more likely to smooth out oddities than to introduce them. The first half of the verse is not too difficult, though a little awkward in expression. NIV translates, probably rightly,

COMMENTARY NOTES

such regulations indeed have an appearance of (possibly ‘a reputation for’) wisdom, with their self-imposed worship (the most likely meaning of a word which occurs only here: it could also indicate a self-imposed discipline heavily enforced), their false humility (as in v. 18, the idea ‘false’ has to be supplied from the context) and their harsh treatment of the body. It is not difficult to picture the sort of religion Paul is opposing here. Its elaborate liturgies and seemingly rigorous self-abasing asceticism give it a name for serious piety: but it is a sham.

Why it is a sham Paul apparently says in the second half of the verse. But what exactly his reason may be has long baffled commentators. One suggested alternative (e.g., RSV margin) gives a strong charge against these regulations: they ‘are of no value, serving only to indulge the flesh’. What looks like rigorous discipline is in fact a subtle form of self-indulgence. This involves reading most of the verse as a parenthesis: ‘which are (though possessing a reputation for wisdom with their self-imposed worship, abject grovellings and harsh physical discipline, all to no value) merely a way of gratifying the flesh’. This may ease the grammatical problem in the first part of the verse, where the main verb ‘are’ (estin) is followed almost at once by an accusative participle ‘having’ (echonta), but at the cost of straining the rest of the sentence almost unbearably. Another alternative is to take the Greek word *time* (here rendered ‘value’) in its more usual sense of ‘honour’, and to suggest that perhaps these practices do not give proper honour to the human body; but this imports too many extraneous ideas into the clause. It is safest overall to follow NIV (and RSV): they (i.e. these regulations) lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. This takes the clause as a single whole, understanding *pros plēsmonēn tēs sarkos*, literally ‘towards the gratifying of the flesh’, as modifying *time*, ‘value’. The value these practices do not have is precisely the one which might make them worthwhile, and which their supporters claim for them: that they restrain fleshly indulgence (which includes not only sensuality but also jealousy, anger and so forth: see Gal. 5:19–21). Genuine holiness, which is an anticipation of the life of the age to come into which the risen Christ has already entered (1:18; 3:1–4), is not to be had by methods whose very nature, focusing as it does on perishable material things, binds them to the present age.²

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIVAC
Michael Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Covenant Commentary
David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT
Robert Bratcher and Eugene Nida, *A Handbook of Paul's Letter to the Colossians*, UBSH
Robert W. Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, IVP New Testament Commentary
Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, New Application Commentary
James D. G. Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIGTC
Dick Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, The Bible Speaks Today
Clinton Arnold, *Colossians*, Word Biblical Commentary

² N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 129–133.