

Colossians 2:8-19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Colossians chapter 2 verses 8 to 19 This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him. Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

In the heart of Colossians chapter 2, Paul presents a series of warnings against false teachings and unhelpful practices. In particular, he addresses the way that the Colossians and other Christians are in danger of lapsing back into a form of religion that remains thoroughly bound to this present age, a bondage that can take either a pagan or a Jewish form, and failing to enter into all the riches that are ours in Christ.

In verse 8, he gives a summary statement. There is a danger of being taken captive. The word translated, takes you captive, is not unlikely a pun upon the word for synagogue. It suggests that one of the great dangers here are Judaizing teachers who might want to capture them, to imprison the Colossians within Judaism and its human traditions, which stand opposed to the word of God and lay heavy burdens upon people.

[2 : 25] What Paul means by the elementary principles of the world is a matter of some debate. They are also referred to in Galatians chapter 4. Some have argued that they are rudimentary principles, others that they are elemental spirits.

However, it seems to me that the strongest case is that they refer to the physical elements. The elementary principles are referring to the physical cosmos. Old Covenant religion was religion ruled by, ordered around, and focused upon physical elements, upon times and seasons, upon matters of diet, upon various physical rites such as circumcision and various sacrifices.

These things are not bad in themselves. And properly used, they can still have some place in worship and broader Christian practice in certain cases. However, they represent a religion under the rule of the natural elements of the physical world, composed of sacrifice, principles of unclean and clean, calendrical feasts.

In this respect, faithful Jewish religion had much in common with the religions of the pagans. This was religion in the flesh, religion under the guardianship of fleshly elements.

Israel had to relate to God in terms of physical sacrifices of specific animals, a physical building and its furniture, and other things like that. The system constructed of the elementary principles guarded and guided Israel in its childhood.

[3 : 43] However, in the New Covenant, there is a move from the shadowy elements to the substance, which is Christ. We don't come under the rule of a physical temple, but we relate to the body of Christ.

We don't have the same physical sacrifices. We perform spiritual sacrifices on the basis of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Our worship still involves symbolic mediation, where physical elements can function as effective symbols of the spiritual acts that we are performing.

But we no longer engage in spiritual intermediation, where physical elements stand in the place of the spiritual realities, so that we relate to the spiritual realities less directly.

Paul's challenge to the Colossians is essentially, why settle for empty philosophy and human tradition when you have the fullness of God and his authority bodily present in Christ? Christ is the bodily substance of what the elementary principles foreshadowed.

Christ is over all other powers. They should not satisfy themselves with lower principles when they have Christ, who is above all. The fullness of deity dwells in him.

[4 : 49] Christ is God dwelling among us. We have the full reality of God in him and should not allow anyone to pawn off a lesser substitute to us. While the Judaizers might want to perform a physical circumcision upon the Colossians, Paul speaks of a circumcision made without hands, putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.

What might he mean by this? Circumcision in the Old Testament was about the symbolic removal of the flesh, that flesh that called out for judgment. As God comes near to judge, the flesh of his people is symbolically removed in a place where it has particular symbolic associations.

It's associated with the generative principle of man. It's also associated with the phallic drive of man, the libido and the desire to dominate and rule. Circumcision then was about the symbolic removal of the flesh, protecting people from divine judgment and marking out the seed.

The full reality of this, however, was performed in Christ's crucifixion, when he dealt decisively with the body of the flesh. Christ's death was a literal cutting off of the flesh.

And we enter into the fullness of this in baptism, which unites us with Christ's death and his resurrection. This doesn't mean that we need baptism in order to be saved on the last day.

[6 : 06] That's not quite the point that Paul is making. Rather, there is something about the social body here that I think is in play. The social body is part of what it means to be in the flesh.

The flesh is not just my physical body. It's the largest social order that I'm part of. My body becomes part of the social order, where it is formed in a distinctive way of life and oriented towards reality.

As the social order addresses my body and subjects it to its formation, I'm guided into particular ways of perceiving, thinking and acting within the world. And this incorporation into a social body occurs through the social body's co-option of our physical bodies.

And there is a claim with obvious and immediate relevance to the rite of baptism here. Baptism is a rite performed upon bodies. It's a ritual connected with the fate of the body, death and resurrection in Christ.

The social body of the church is forged, identified and characterized in large measure through the practice of baptism. It makes and it represents a social reality that we become part of.

[7 : 11] The meaning of baptism is not just a meaning for me as an individual. It's a meaning for us as a group, as we live out a new form of life as a new body, a body that is defined by the death and resurrection of Christ.

Baptism forms people in many ways from the outside in. It forms us by making us part of a society. It embeds us within a social order and a world, rather than just treating us as detached thinking individuals.

N.T. Wright comments upon this dimension in his treatment of verse 11. As a result of their baptism into Christ, the Colossians now belong first and foremost to the family of God, and not therefore to the human families and their local rulers to which they formerly belonged.

Body can in fact easily carry the connotation of a group of people, needing further redefinition to make it clear which group is envisaged, as in body of Christ. In that context, flesh can easily provide the further requisite definition, since it can carry not only the meanings of sinful human nature, but also, simultaneously, the meanings of family solidarity.

The phrase can thus easily mean, in the stripping off of the old human solidarities. The convert, in stripping off his clothes for baptism, the baptismal reference in the next verse has coloured the language, leaves behind, as every adult candidate for baptism in, say, a Muslim or Hindu society knows, the solidarities of the old life, the network of family and society to which, until then, he or she has given his primary allegiance.

[8 : 45] Baptism, then, is an event of unplugging. We are taken out from the old solidarities of the flesh to which we belonged. We are united with Christ, in his death, in which his body was cut off from the old solidarities.

People often resist a strong account of baptism, believing that it gives the impression that we need baptism in order to be saved, thinking by that, that salvation means being saved on the last day.

