

I Intro. (Mar. 1, 1987, ACC; Mar. 11, 2007)

Proto-Gnosticism or incipient Gnosticism had the two practical features of mysticism and asceticism. Some of the mystical experiential features were noted in the last section of Col. 2:16-19. In this section is emphasized the Gnostic propensity to feature ascetic practices (vv. 20-23). In reality, the two go hand in hand. For it was often in the midst the self-imposed duress of ascetic practices that one was more likely to experience the supernatural phenomenon of visions and angelic appearances, etc. Paul had repudiated these phenomena, now he repudiates those strict practices of self-denial that in part gave rise to them.

Asceticism (“the pseudo-spiritual position that revels in rules of physical self-denial.”¹) cannot produce true spirituality (Col. 2:20-23). Therefore we must not abandon freedom for bondage (Col. 2:20-22). Such infliction of afflictions is useless against fleshly indulgence (2:23).

II Asceticism Cannot Produce True Spirituality (Col. 2:20-23).

A. We must not abandon freedom for bondage (Col. 2:20-22).

1. (vs. 20) Paul turned his attention away from the failed false teachers of the previous section to the believers who had succumbed to their fallacies and directly confronted them with them with the error of their legalism. He said, “If you have died with Christ (Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ),” a first class conditional clause, which did not imply any doubt; “an actual case...taken as a supposition”²; Paul rhetorically used the if clause to draw the Colossians in to his discussion. So he was assuming it true for the sake of his discussion, but it was *in fact* true, the Colossians had “died with Christ.” As with them, so also with us, at the moment of justifying faith, His death became our death, that is, we died with Him vicariously, so that for all those sinful things we had done for which we deserved to die, we immediately received the benefits of that payment of His death

that had been made so long ago. In vs. 12, Paul referred to this event as, “having been buried with Him in baptism.” See the similar discussion on circumcision in vs. 11. So in dying with Christ, we were set free from the penalty for our sins.

“Paul uses the word ‘died’ in many different relations, expressing that with which death dissolves the connection. Thus, ‘died unto sin,’ unto ‘self,’ unto ‘the law,’ unto ‘the world’”³ (cf. Rm. 6:2; 2Cor. 5:14, 15; Rm. 7:6; Gal. 2:19). Here the Colossians are said to have died “to (ἀπὸ) the elementary principles (στοιχεῖων) of the world (κόσμου),” literally, “away from,” indicating a definite break from, “the elementary principles of the world,” that is, of the world’s system, which is under the domination of Satan (1Jn. 5:19) and is characterized by, “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1Jn. 2:16). Ironically the world’s solution to man’s sin problem, if you please, is not inconsistent with those characteristics, not could it be. Rather than those evil impulses being quelled by that “solution,” they are actually exaggerated and made worse (Col. 2:18), with people being deluded into thinking (2:8) that an answer has been found. We are familiar with the “elementary principles of the world” from 2:8. There we said:

The false doctrines being taught were also said to be, ‘according to’ the standard of ‘the elementary principles of the world.’ ‘Elementary principles’ translates a Greek expression, τὰ στοιχεῖα...which is nicely summarized by A. T. Robertson accordingly; ‘Old word for anything in a στοιχος... (row, series) like the letters of the alphabet, the materials of the universe (II Peter 3:10, 12), elementary teaching (Heb. 5:12), elements of Jewish ceremonial training (Acts 15:10; Gal. 4:3, 9), the specious arguments of the Gnostic philosophers as here with all their aeons and rules of life.’⁴ It seems that in general the best way to understand the meaning of ‘the elementary principles of the world’ here is that they refer to certain assumed ideas by unbelievers, perhaps inspired by

¹Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

²Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 278.

³M.R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies*, electronic ed. (: . .). Col 2:20.

⁴Robertson, Archibald Thomas, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, (Nashville, Tennessee, USA: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention) 1998, c1933.

‘evil spirits,’⁵ about how to live this life and about how to prepare to meet God, whatever that may mean to them. Inevitably that implies legalism, as is the case here. We are surrounded by a world with very similar notions about the mystical, experiential things, the origin of the universe, and about being good enough to be accepted by God into heaven one day.

The fact is that at the moment of faith, positionally we as believers died to those ill-conceived notions arising from guilt and, yes, pride about how to prepare to meet God. The Colossians no doubt were aware of that, so Paul asked them a “why (τί)” question. The nature of such a question is to challenge somebody’s thinking; it calls for an accounting. So Paul said, “why, as if you were living (ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ) in the world,” an, “in-the-world life,”⁶ meaning, “as if you were living as a part of the world (system) in an unsaved state, a condition not unprecedented on the part of believers in the NT. For Paul challenged the Corinthians regarding the fact that they were, “walking like mere men” (1Cor. 3:3b), that is, that they were behaving like unbelievers. In question form Paul then offered proof that the Colossians were behaving like unbelievers, “why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees (δογματίζεσθε).” The chief characteristic of false religion, which is all religion other than Christianity, which in a real sense is no religion, is the imposition of decrees. The word translated, “submit yourself to decrees,” is *δογματίζεσθε* (*dogmatizesthe*), which is either a middle or passive voice. The NASB takes it as middle, “submit yourself to decrees.” The Contemporary English Version seems to accept the passive voice, “Why do you live as if you had to obey such rules as, ‘Don’t handle this. Don’t taste that. Don’t touch this.’?”⁷ The sense of the passive is, “here (a) permissive pass...*permit yourselves to be put under etc.*”⁸

In English, “dogma,” means, “A doctrine or a corpus of doctrines relating to matters such as morality and faith, set forth in an authoritative manner by a church.”⁹ Very often, those constitute legalism pure and simple. If so, then a transliteration of the Greek is appropriate here: “To permit oneself to be ‘dogmatized’ is to permit life to become a round of rules again.”¹⁰ Because the noun “dogma,” translated, “decrees (δόγμασιν, lemma, δόγμα),” appears in vs. 14, this verse evidently recalls it. There the reference is primarily to the Mosaic Law. So also here, the Mosaic Law is in the background, but we must in neither place limit the meaning to that legalistic system. For Paul had in mind the syncretistic systems that merged pagan religious ideas with the Mosaic system. There is *nothing* in the Mosaic system for example that called for arbitrary self-abasement (vs. 18, 23), combined with the severe treatment of the body (vs. 23).

2. (vs. 21) Paul then offered some examples of these dogmas or decrees which were offered as virtual commands by the proto-Gnostics, “Do not handle (ἄψη), do not taste (γεύση), do not touch (θίγης)!” The grammatical sense is that believers must not start to do such things. “Handle” has the sense, “to partake of someth., w. cultic implications, *have contact with, touch*. The abs. μὴ ἄψη *you must not touch or handle* Col 2:21 can be interpreted in this sense. On the other hand, ἄπτεσθαι can mean *eat*, like our ‘touch food’...We would, then, have in this passage the anticlimax *eat, taste, touch*,”¹¹ and Lightfoot agrees that this is *possible*, “Thus the two words ἄψη and θίγης being separate in meaning, γεύση may well interpose; and the three together will form a descending series.”¹² In the end however, he settles for the position of the NASB, “Handle not, nor yet taste, nor even touch.”¹³

Perhaps in view regarding things to be vigorously avoided would be such things as, “the avoidance of oil, of wine, or of flesh-meat, the

⁵Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

⁶H. E. Dana, Th.D., Julius R. Mantey, Th.D., D.D., *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (The Macmillan Company, 1927). 150.

⁷The Contemporary English Version : With Apocrypha. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Col 2:20-21.

⁸William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 254.

⁹*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from InfoSoft International, Inc. All rights reserved.

¹⁰Frank E. Gaebelein, J. D. Douglas, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11. (Zondervan Publishing House, 1978). 207

¹¹William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 126.

¹²Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*. 8th ed. London and New York: Macmillan and co., 1886. 201.

¹³Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*. 8th ed. London and New York: Macmillan and co., 1886. 202.

shunning of contact with a stranger or a religious inferior, and the like.”¹⁴

3. (vs. 22) That food laws were primarily in view in the previous verse seems manifest here, as Paul parenthetically explained about them; “which all *refer to* things destined to perish (φθορὰν ‘breakdown of organic matter, *dissolution, deterioration, corruption*, in the world of nature...*all of which are meant for destruction by being consumed*”¹⁵ – Bold added.) with the using (ἀποχρήσει ‘*consuming, using up*’¹⁶.” This is essentially what Jesus explained about food in Mk. 7:19 that when eaten, “it does not go into,” a man’s “heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated.” It follows then that, “*Thus He* declared all foods clean.” Of course, elsewhere Paul made it clear that food does *not* have to do with spiritual growth and development (1Tm. 4:1-5).

The decrees or dogmas of vs. 21 are what are in view here as Paul says that they are, “in accordance with the commandments (ἐντάλματα ‘that which is commanded as officially binding’¹⁷) and teachings (διδασκαλίας ‘that which is taught...*instruction*’¹⁸) of men” and thus are certainly not of God. Again this matches well with Mk. 7 where Jesus referred to similar things, as the “Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered together around Him” (vs. 1), and Jesus accused them of, “Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (vs. 7b). He added, “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” He was also saying to them, “You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition” (Mk. 7:8-9). The source of the false teaching in 1Tm. 4 was, “liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron” (vs. 2b), who were, “paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (vs. 1b). So also those today who advocate similar strict food codes are false teachers who substitute for the truth of God’s word, men’s ideas. Paul had already pointed out

that the source of incipient Gnostic thought was “the tradition of men” (Col. 2:8).

All of this was put in the form of a question by Paul. He was essentially saying, if Christ completed His work on the cross and you have benefited from it by faith in liberty from human obligation to do something about your own sins, why are you now living as if it were no longer true? It made no sense. They should therefore abandon their legalism and return to grace, just as the Galatians were exhorted to do so.

B. Such infliction of afflictions is useless against fleshly indulgence (2:23).

1. (vs. 23) One of the attractive features of legalism is that it looks impressive and efficacious in the midst of people putting themselves through so much, inflicting themselves with many afflictions, just as the prophets of Baal did centuries ago, but it was and is all to no avail.

Paul said, “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom (ἄτινα ἐστὶν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας),” literally, “which sort of things”¹⁹ (referring to the understood δόγμασιν) “have the appearance,” literally, “word (λόγον),” with the nuance of, “are reported as,” or “*hav(ing) the reputation*”²⁰ for, or “*pass(ing) for wisdom*,”²¹ that is, “The false teachers of Colossae consider that their convictions are”²² wisdom, but it is the wisdom of the world (vs. 20), not of God (cf. 1Cor. 2:6-8).

All of this took place in the sphere of their “self-made religion (ἐθελοθρησκία),” that is, “*do-it-yourself religion, idiosyncratic religion*, perh. *would-be religion*,”²³ with the reference being to, “a set of religious beliefs and practices resulting from one’s own desires and initiative—‘self-imposed religion, religion thought up by oneself.’”²⁴ The meaning then is, “that these people adopt a form of worship according to their own ideas of what is right, rather than according to God’s word.”²⁵ “This word occurs nowhere else

14Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon. 8th ed. London and New York: Macmillan and co., 1886. 201.

15William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 1054.

16William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 125.

17Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 339.

18Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 240.

19Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon. 8th ed. London and New York: Macmillan and co., 1886. 203.

20William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 630.

21Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 599.

22Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 934.

23Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 276.

24Low, Johannes P. and Eugene Albert Nida. Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains. electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. New York: United Bible societies, 1996. c1989. 1:532.

25William MacDonald; edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System.* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

and was probably coined by Paul...to describe the voluntary worship of angels.”²⁶

A further aspect of the sphere in which they worshiped was “self-abasement (ταπεινοφροσύνη),” a term we had in vs. 18, where we learned that the word is typically an excellent Christian character quality in the NT, as in Col. 3:12, but here, as in 2:18, the sense is one of false humility. For one cannot have true humility and be “inflated without cause by his fleshly mind” (vs. 18b) at the same time. It is likely that the false teachers took this thing to some sort of weird extreme, thus the translation, “self-abasement.”

That fits with the next feature here, “severe treatment of the body (ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος),” “from the sense ‘spare nothing’, i.e. lavish on someth., there is a transference to *sparing very little for* someth. as in *severe treatment σώματος of the body* (=asceticism).”²⁷ What forms these veritable tortures took is not stated, but we surmise that extreme fasting would have been a definite part of it, and perhaps deliberate exposure to harsh conditions such as cold and heat, perhaps also the direct imposition of pain on oneself as in modern (and ancient) self-flagellation.

What was the effect of all this? Paul said that all of these things were, “of no value against fleshly indulgence (οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τιμι πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός).” The original is difficult with πλησμονὴν meaning, “process of securing complete satisfaction, *satiety* esp. w. food and drink, but also w. other types of enjoyment, *satisfaction, gratification*.”²⁸ Some have tried to turn that meaning into a good sense for “flesh”: “The Gk. exegetes understood this to mean *for the gratification of physical needs*.”²⁹ However, “σάρξ, acc. to vs. 18, is surely to be taken in a pejorative sense, and has the force ‘against’. The transl. is prob. best made along the lines of NRSV: *of no value in checking self-indulgence*.”³⁰

III Conc.

The conclusion is evident: Asceticism is absolutely worthless for curbing the flesh or enhancing spirituality. One will inevitably be worse off for having attempted it.

“The emphases of these false teachers are still with us today. The first is ‘higher’ knowledge (Gnosticism). The second is the observance of laws to win God’s love (legalism). The third is the belief that beings other than Christ must mediate between people and God (mysticism). The fourth is the practice of abstaining from things to earn merit with God (asceticism).”³¹

²⁶Robertson, Archibald Thomas, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, (Nashville, Tennessee, USA: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention) 1998, c1933.

²⁷Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 155.

²⁸Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 830.

²⁹Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 830.

³⁰Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 830.

³¹Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003). Col 2:20.