

Colossians 2

1. In this chapter Paul takes head-on a form of Jewish asceticism and mysticism which was casting its shadow on the young Colossian church. Wright describes its attraction for the young pagan converts:

One of the principal appeals of Judaism in the pagan world of the first century was its high moral code. It made heavy demands, and often when people are sick and tired of the murky and immoral world of paganism they are glad to embrace a way of life which offers clear, bright, clean lines. Serious-minded people in a place like Colossae, people who had begun to realize that their pagan gods weren't doing the any good, might well feel that the regulation of the Torah itself, and of the numerous explanatory additions that first-century teachers expounded, were going to be a great help to them in finding a new way of life that would leave the messy world of paganism behind once and for all. 'Don't handle this, don't taste that, don't touch this'; the very detail of the regulations, and the severe self-discipline needed to keep them, would make them feel they must be making advances in their moral and spiritual lives. (*Wright Lite*, 172-4)

The Jewish "disciplines" in question were a combination of dos and don'ts, likely including kosher laws, Sabbath observance, fasting and tithing, practices related to festivals, etc. In recent decades there has been in the Church a renewal of interest in spiritual disciplines such as those described in Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, which includes meditation, prayer, fasting and study; simplicity, solitude, submission, service; confession, worship, guidance, and celebration—also a combination of dos and don'ts meant to draw one closer to God.

What religious disciplines have you employed, and what appeal did you find in them? Did they offer you any of the clear-cut simplicity Wright describes? (This is not to imply that Foster's revival of discipline is just a modern version of Pharisaical asceticism.)

2. Jewish religious practices of a more moderate sort continue to draw evangelicals, as evidenced by popular books like *Mudhouse Sabbath* and those of *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*. The interest in Jewish piety isn't surprising given the long history Christianity itself has with religious disciplines, from the Benedictine rule and other religious orders, to the modern "new monastics," from the disciplines of the Puritans to the Pietists and the later Holiness movement.¹

Puritan observance, for example, included the following: "Closet" exercises (solitary meditation and prayer in the morning and at bedtime, and on Saturday to prepare for the Sabbath); "private conference" (spiritual guidance from more experienced Christians); family devotions; neighborhood prayer meetings; strict Sabbath observance; and a simple lifestyle which stood in contrast to that of the culture.

¹*CH&B* issue 41 "The American Puritans", Vol XIII, No. 1, p. 16; *Christianity Today* Sept. 2003, "The New Monasticism," p. 41; *CH&B* issue 93 "A Devoted Life"; *CH&B* issue 10, "Pietism".

Paul warns that the Jewish system of pietistic practice being pressed on the Colossians is “empty deceit” and will “take you captive” (2:8). He says that Jesus has already both “disarmed the rulers and authorities” (2:15) and erased “the record that stood against us with its legal demands” (2:14). Paul also says, more generally, that this sort of religious practice is “only a shadow of what is to come” (in new covenant; 2:17), and is “of no value in checking self-indulgence” (2:23).

What sets Christian spiritual discipline (either that of Foster or the Puritans) apart from first-century Jewish discipline? Do we really grow closer to God through a set of extra-biblical dos and don'ts, however well intentioned?

3. Paul presents in Colossians 2 an alternative path to spiritual growth and maturity in 2:6-10:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to **fullness in him**.

Two related passages from Ephesians show that Paul word “fullness” is tied to spiritual maturity:

³⁵₁₇ “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be **filled with all the fullness** of God.” (Eph 3:18-19)

³⁵₁₇ “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of **the full stature of Christ**.” (Eph 4:11-13)

Two elements of Paul's plan for spiritual growth are (1) *a deepening understanding of God's love in Jesus*, and (2) *unity of the body of believers*, both found not only in Ephesians but in Col 2:2: ²

I want their hearts to be encouraged and **united in love**, so that they may have all the riches of **assured understanding** and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself...

- a. What speaks to you most deeply of God's love? How does one go about deepening one's understanding of God's love in Christ?

2 This is consistent with 1:28, where Paul says he's admonishing and teaching the Colossians in all wisdom in order to present them mature in Christ, and this verse follows a reference to the mystery that Christ's atoning sacrifice saves Gentiles (i.e. Colossians) as well as Jews.

- b. If Paul’s path to spiritual growth entails unity of the body, is it also true that a fragmented church can stymie your spiritual growth? Do you find our church’s unity, or lack thereof, aids or impedes your growing closer to God?
 - c. Can you give an example of how using your gifts aids your spiritual growth (Eph 4:11-13)?
4. The mind is the arena in which the Colossians are defending themselves against captivity (2:8): Paul admonishes the Colossians—lit. setting their minds in proper order (Wright, 93)—and teaches them in all wisdom to present them mature in Christ (1:28). Paul also struggles for them that they might “have all the riches of assured understanding” so that no one may “deceive you with plausible arguments” (2:2, 4). Paul counsels them to “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that on earth” in order to resist the false teaching of the Judaizers.

Walsh and Keesmaat tie this to what they see as a fundamental theme of idolatry running through this passage, since the Colossians, if drawn into Jewish asceticism, would be doing so to appease the “rulers and authorities” (2:10). The connection between idolatry and the cognitive realm, as W&K read it, is a particularly pernicious danger faced when we cede any personal power or autonomy to these “rulers and authorities”:

We agree with Walter Brueggemann’s contention that one of the greatest dangers of our time is the “monopoly of our imagination.” Bowing before an idol, Brueggemann argues, is fundamentally a matter of “yielding the imagination” so that the world is experienced and interpreted in terms established by the idol. Consequently, “the key pathology of our time, which seduces us all, is the reduction of our imagination so that we are too numbed, satiated, and co-opted to do serious imaginative work.” (141)

If W&K are right, then we will experience a difference in our thinking as we pry ourselves away from our cultural idolatry to peace and safety at any cost, to instant gratification and constant entertainment, in short, to business as usual in the Western first world. This difference in thinking will take the form of a blossoming of imagination outside of cultural and self-directed lines.³

How does this fit with your experience?

5. Looking more closely at 2:20-3:4, and especially 3:1-4:
- a. What, in context, are the “things above” that we are to set our minds on, and what are the “things that are on earth”? (Cf. Phil 4:8.)
 - b. As in Romans, here Paul startlingly encourages the Colossians to consider themselves dead, and their very lives hidden. Why? How does this metaphor help them? Is there any way in which it can be said to be more than a mere metaphor?

³ Even without the idolatry angle their idea that the Colossians risk a shrinking of their imaginative horizons is consistent with their facing captivity to a lie. When a lie is accepted as fact, the perimeters of thought and imagination must be affected.

- c. Paul appeared to be a “prisoner, an eccentric Jew to the Romans and a worse-than-Gentile traitor to the Jews” but in Christ, who *is* his life (3:4), Paul is “the apostle, the servant of the King.” The Colossians, “insignificant ex-pagans from a third-rate country town, will be seen in a glory which, if it were now to appear, one might be tempted to worship” (Wright, 133).

The world looks at you as middle-aged parents who are making ends meet, but aren’t unusually attractive or rich or accomplished and will never be famous or make a lasting mark on the world. To the world you are growing old while your influence on even your circle of average acquaintances wanes. You can be proud of your modest accomplishments, but honestly, how special are you? In the eyes of the world, not at all.

Describe who you, and we, are in Christ. Describe the life you have hidden that no one but other Christians knows about. Describe the you, and the us, which is waxing while the life everyone else sees is waning. Describe “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” not with false modesty, but with the truth that is in Christ, and that is meant to sustain you in the corrosive environment of this fallen world.

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Fun fact: Susannah Wesley employed the Puritan practice of “private conference” (see Question 2) with her children. Private conferences also show up in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Men*, where Mother Baehr (Jo) kept a book all week, and every Sunday night she would sit down with each of the boys in turn and review their week for good or for ill, and give out encouragement and admonishments as needed. (Thanks to Sue Collins!)