The Second Chapter of Colossians

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The arbitrariness of the chapter divisions of the biblical text are well observed in this passage, for. its opening paragraph (2:1ff.) is closely related to the sentences which conclude chapter 1, and the thought of its concluding paragraph (2:20-23) so clearly continues into the first one of chapter 3 (verses 1-3), it is evident that no break should have occurred between them. Nevertheless, the thought of chapter 2 flows on in a continuous argument, and it does no harm to consider it as a unit, provided that we bear in mind the context.

It is in this section that Paul comes most obviously to grips with that amalgam of religious thought which had found its way into the church at Colossae, and which we now know must have formed one of the many tributaries which went to make up the stream of Gnosticism as it emerged in the literature of the second century of our era. This type of thinking was so widespread in the ancient world, Paul would have found little difficulty in recognizing from the account given him by Epaphras the main features of the brand which had been introduced into the Colossian community.

In the opening sentence of this chapter Paul makes known his concern for the members of this church, describing his care as a strenuous engagement in a contest (*agon*, the prime meaning of which is an athletic contest but which easily passes over into a *struggle* or *fight*). This conflict he expresses in a double way: first in prayer for the Colossian Christians, whom he has never met, and secondly by engaging in an exposition of the Faith, through which they may perceive the deficiencies of the doctrine to which they have become attracted. The intercession and the instruction are alike calculated to knit the community in love (verse 2), for nothing is so easily destructive of Christian fellowship as the attempt to remedy heresy (cf. Rev. 2:2-4), and also to assist them to attain to a mature understanding of God's "secret," which is Christ. The rest of the chapter may be viewed as an unfolding of this theme. Its contents indicate that God's "secret" in Christ is nothing less than the revelation conveyed in the total redemptive action of God in Christ which we call the gospel. Paul's exposition of it in this chapter may be summarized as follows:

(i) The sufficiency of Christ's revelation for thought and life (verses 1-7);

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- (ii) The adequacy of Christ's redemption to bestow forgiveness and fulness of life (verses 8-15);
- (iii) The completeness of Christ's deliverance from every form of legalism (verses 16-23).

Paul's immediate declaration that in Christ "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden (verse 3) is intended to counter the idea that more is needed, and that more is available than that which has been made known to the Church. It is the hallmark of new religionists to claim that what God has made known and achieved through Christ can be improved on and

requires supplementation. The first two centuries of the Church's existence were plagued almost as much as the Church in the twentieth century by proclamations of superior revelations. Then as now the apostolic answer to such movements is to contemplate afresh the nature of that revelation and redemption which forms the heart of the gospel.

The fundamental appeal of Colossians is stated in verses 6-7 of this chapter: "As you received (*parelabete*) Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught..." The verb *paralambano* is commonly used of receiving elements of tradition,¹ and it is particularly appropriate here, for the Colossians are exhorted to continue in the Christian life in accordance with the apostolic tradition of Christ in the gospel. Their life (i.e. behavior, for *live* is paraphrastic for "walk") should be determined by the revelation of Christ crucified and risen (a thought worked out in detail in chapter 3); and their whole existence, including their reflection on faith, is to be similarly "rooted and built up and established" in accordance with that tradition ("just as you were taught"). And withal, Paul writes, "let your hearts overflow with thankfulness" (verse 7 NEB), for life determined by Christ is a life of gratitude.

The nature of the false teaching in Colossae is more closely defined in verse 8. It is described as a "philosophy," and so indeed it was, even though it was a religious system of thought. For the basis of all forms of Gnosticism was a dualism of matter and spirit; the former was viewed as inherently evil, and the latter alone as good. Working from this fundamental principle the Gnostics were compelled to remove God from the material creation, and so to postulate the existence of a graduated hierarchy of spiritual powers in order to bridge the gap between God and the world (hence the constant danger of Christian Gnostics of viewing Christ as merely one of the hierarchy). Sin was seen as primarily an involvement in the material world, and salvation an emancipation from it. The Gnostic—the "man who knows"—is the happy individual who is initiated into the secret of how to find redemption from this world. On such a basis a doctrine of incarnation is impossible, for God cannot be involved in the material order; evil loses its moral connotation; redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ is unthinkable, since the divine

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"Christ" was not really human; hence he did not suffer a human death, and resurrection is a ghastly notion for a Gnostic under any circumstances, let alone in reference to the Christ; and since the notion of the worthlessness of the body can lead alike to asceticism and antinomianism, Christian morality becomes imperiled from the root upwards. Indeed in the Gnostic view the Christian Faith becomes a different religion and gives rise to a different way of life. It is not to be wondered at that in this context the term "philosophy" is used with a pejorative sense. This does not prove that Paul rejected philosophy as such (consider the address to the Athenians in Acts 17), but he would probably have approved F. C. Synge's description of it as "philosophistry," and accordingly he characterizes it as "empty deceit."

This philosophic faith is said to rest on "human tradition," or more simply, "the tradition of men." It belonged to the nature of Gnosticism to claim for itself a secret line of tradition, and Christian Gnostics did not hesitate to affirm that their teaching went back to the apostles and

¹ It is the equivalent of the Hebrew term *qibbel*, used among the Jews of handing on the authoritative tradition of the Fathers, and it appears in Paul's own writings in a similar sense in I Cor. 11:23, 15:1, 3, etc., especially I Th. 4: 1, 2 Th. 3:6.

to Jesus himself. But since their outlook was so completely at variance with the traditions claimed to be apostolic and with the teaching of Jesus current in the Church, Paul could not but view it as a tradition originating with men with darkened minds, in contrast to that tradition which originated in the divine self-disclosure given in the life, words, death and resurrection of Christ (cf. the implications of 1 Cor. 11: 23 "I received from the Lord...").

More importantly, the false faith was propounded in accordance with "the elements of the world" (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*). What precisely Paul meant by this phrase is still debated. The term "elements" was used of objects standing in a row, and so was used of the letters of the alphabet; it was therefore applied to mean "elementary knowledge," as in Hebrews 5:12 (in the NEB *to stoicheia tes arches ton logion tou Theou* is rendered as "the ABC of God's oracles"). In our passage "the elements of the world" may be viewed as set in parallelism to "the tradition of men," and so convey the thought of elementary teaching about God which characterises this world. Such a meaning suits the occurrence of the term in Galatians 4:3, where it is linked with the phrase "when we were infants"; accordingly, Burton interprets *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* as "the rudimentary religious teachings possessed by the race."²

Most modern exegetes, however, consider that the context, both in Colossians and in Galatians, favors the view that in these passages *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* denote living beings of some kind. In our chapter emphasis is laid on the triumph of Christ over the principalities and powers, and

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a rebuttal is given of the worship of angels. In Galatians 4 the term occurs in a context which speaks of a son set under guardians and trustees, and Paul comments, "So with us... we were slaves to the elements of the world." He reminds the Galatians that they were formerly in bondage to beings that are "no gods," and at once asks, "How can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly *elements*, whose slaves you want to be once more?" (Gal. 4:8f.). Many therefore believe that in both letters Paul employs the term *stoicheia* to mean spiritual powers, which the Colossians at least would have especially associated with the stars, and which therefore would have been credited with power to control the destiny of human kind. Both the RSV and NEB translators have adopted this view and render *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* as "the elemental spirits of the universe."³ Clearly there is much to be said in favor of this interpretation; and it makes excellent sense in Colossians, in view of the stress laid on angel worship and the implications of Gnosticism itself, and it may well be the right one. I am, however, uneasy about the fact that still no instance has come to light for such a meaning of

² See E. de W. Burton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, "ICC," vol. 34 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), pp. 517f.; the same interpretation is adopted by J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (3rd ed.; London: Macmillan & Co., 1897), p. 178; T. Abbott, A *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, "ICC," vol. 35 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), p. 247; C.F.D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1958). p. 92.

³ Among expositors on Colossians Dibelius, E. F. Scott, Beare, Conzelmann, Bruce, Lohse, have concurred with this interpretation, and of those on Galatians Althaus, Schlier, Oehke, Bonnard. See further R. K. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (New York: Scribner, 1951-55), I: 173; C.A.A. Scott, *Christianity according to St. Paul* (Cambridge: University Press, L927), p. 31; D.E.H. Whitely, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), p. 25.

this phrase in literature as early as the New Testament,⁴ and Paul himself nowhere numbers the *stoicheia* with the *principalities* and powers.

Accordingly, attention should be paid to a third line of interpretation, adopted by some scholars who have given close study to the matter. The idea which would most readily spring to mind among ordinary people in the phrase ta stoicheia tou kosmou was "the basic elements of the world," above all, the four from which all things were thought to be derived, namely earth, water, air, and fire. Delling, therefore, defines the phrase as meaning "that on which the existence of this world rests and which constitutes the being of man,⁵ and he suggests that it would be an easy step from this to employ the term to denote "that on which the existence of man before Christ, and notably in pre-Christian religion rests." In Galatians the concept especially applies to the condition of men subject to the slavery of law, notably the servitude to the law of Moses but also to that of heathen religions. In Colossians it is set in parallelism to the traditions of men and in opposition to the Christ of the gospel. Religious life under the elements of the world is characterised by life in conformity with prescriptions ("legal demands," RSV of Col. 2:14), hence the appropriateness of this complementary term to "philosophy" as a designation of the quasi-Gnostic religion at Colossae; for the Jewish element in Gnosticism was everywhere marked, but notably at Colossae, where insistence was made on circumcision, ceremonial distinctions regarding foods, the clean and the unclean, and the veneration of angels, which was a marked element in Essenism. The phrase ta stoicheia tou kosmou could therefore

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denote the powers of law and flesh and sin which dominate man in this world and which condemn him even in his religion to a death from which he cannot redeem himself.⁶

The decision between these three views, especially the latter two, is unusually difficult; if one inclines to the last it should be with reserve and acknowledging the uncertainty which attaches to it.

At all events we can understand why Paul contrasts so strongly a religion of this order with the apostolic gospel delivered to the Church. The answer to a travesty of the Christian Faith such as that current in Colossae is to point again to the supremacy of the Incarnate Christ. "In him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily" (verse 9). That is, the totality of deity dwells in Christ—not only in reality as distinct from what is seeming or symbolic or partial, but in Christ as incarnate, true man and true God in heaven as on earth. Accordingly, it is in Christ that the Christian finds "fulness" of life, for in union with him he participates in the fulness of grace which dwells in Christ, and that cannot be supplemented by any religious system or actions or powers Christ is all, and over all (verse 10).

In particular no religious rite can add to the effectiveness of Christ's redemption. Should any point to the alleged necessity of undergoing circumcision for entry into the people of God and

⁴ The earliest attestation is in the Testament of Solomon, 8.2, a post-Christian writing.

⁵ Article on "Stoicheion," T.W.N.T., VI:685.

⁶ See the very instructive discussion of Delling, *op. cit.*, pp. 683ff.: the same approach is adopted by A. J. Bandstra in his study *The Law and the Elements of the World, An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Teaching* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1964), and J. Blinzler, "Lexikalisches zu dem Terminus *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* bei Paulus," *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis* (Romae: E. Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1961-63), II: 429-43.

the state of salvation, let it be known that in Christ the Christian has undergone a more radical circumcision than Jews or Gnostics know: in this "circumcision" the believer's whole body has been sloughed off, for he died when Christ was killed on the cross, he was buried with Christ in his grave, and he has been raised with Christ to a new existence in the power of God. Such appears to be the gist of verses 11-12, but the language of verse 11 is obscure and had given rise to a variety of interpretations on points of detail.

There can be no doubt that the unusual application of the practice of circumcision at this juncture is due to the insistence of the Colossian teachers that this rite⁷ continues to be obligatory within the Christian Church. It is part of the Jewish element incorporated within the Gnostic doctrine. Paul's reply proceeds on the assumption that Christians do not need the rite, for they have a spiritual equivalent, "a circumcision made without hands." This is further defined as a "putting off the body of flesh." A popular interpretation of this phrase is to view it as equivalent to "putting off the old nature" (Col.

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3:9), so as to relate it to baptism (cf. Gal. 3:27 for an example of this use of the symbolism, drawn from taking off clothes for baptism and putting on fresh ones afterwards); "the circumcision of Christ" is then understood as meaning "the circumcision which Christ gave," i.e. Christian circumcision, which is baptism. On this interpretation Paul is saying that Christians do not need to submit to circumcision, for baptism has replaced it in the Church of Christ. This is a quite straightforward interpretation, and it would explain how it is that Paul proceeds to the exposition of baptism in verse 12. The fact that Paedo-baptists have drawn questionable inferences as to the relation of circumcision and baptism, particularly in maintaining that in the primitive Church the latter was applied in the same way as the former, is not sufficient ground for rejecting the concept of baptism as a spiritual circumcision, given by Christ to serve in the new age a greater purpose than that fulfilled by the physical rite under the old covenant.⁸

I myself, nevertheless, believe that the circumcision idea in this passage is more forcefully applied by Paul than the foregoing interpretation allows. In this context "putting (or stripping) off the body of flesh" is most plausibly contrasted with the minor operation in circumcision: bluntly it appears to say that instead of stripping off a little piece of flesh, as in circumcision, the Christian has stripped off his whole body of flesh, and this happened because Christ was "circumcised," that is, killed on the cross; the Christian shares so completely in that event, it is as if he himself had suffered that appalling bloody death.

⁷ Or a replacement of it suitable to Gnostic susceptibilities, see E. Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an die Kolosser and an Philemon*, "Kritischexegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament," ed. H.A.W. Meyer (i,. Aufl.; Göttingen: Vandenheeck & Ruprecht, 1930), *ad loc*.

⁸ The appeal to this interpretation of the passage in the interest of justifying infant baptism has been notably used by J. Jeremias, *Hat die Urkirche die Kindertaufe geübt?* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949), p. 40; *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. D. Cairns (London: SCM, 1960), pp. 39f., and by O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1950), pp. 58ff. [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/baptism_cullmann.pdf]. A non-sectarian exposition of this interpretation will be found in the commentaries of Lightfoot; Abbot; Masson, *ad loc*; Meyer's article on "Peritemno" in the T.W.N.T. VI: 82; in the Baptist J. Schneider's *Baptism and Church in the New Testament*, trans. E. A. Payne (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1957), pp. 32-34, and Dale Moody, *Baptism: Foundation for Christian Unity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), p. 94.

The language of that last sentence is deliberately chosen. For there is evidence that by Paul's day the Jews laid great stress on the blood shedding that took place in the rite of circumcision. Exodus 4:22ff. was especially influential in this development, for it was maintained that Moses' life was saved by the sacrificial blood shed in the circumcision of his son. The blood of circumcision came to be viewed as the blood of a sacrifice, which was the necessary accompaniment of all Old Testament covenants, and it was regarded as of equal importance to the blood of the Passover.⁹ Despite, therefore, the lack of parallels for the phrase "circumcision of Christ" as a designation of his death, it is easy to see how natural it was that this concept should develop, and there would be the best of reasons for Paul to employ it

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among a group susceptible to Jewish ideas as to the significance of circumcision. Moreover, this understanding of Paul's language suits well the introduction of baptism in verse 12, for the passage then reflects the primitive declaration of the gospel, "Christ died for our sins... he was buried, he was raised..." (1 Cor. 15:3f.), just as Romans 6:3f. does. It would affirm, "You shared with Christ's death, you were buried with him, and you were raised with him, for such is the meaning of your baptism,"

If this is a correct interpretation of Paul's thought, it indicates how very easily he passed from the thought of circumcision to baptism, and how closely related in his mind were baptism and the Christian's participation in Christ's death and resurrection.

The former seems to me to be possible because Paul the Apostle, in contrast to Saul the Pharisee, was concerned less with the physical rite of circumcision than with the "circumcision made without hands," i.e. the circumcision of the heart, of which the prophets spoke (see Jer. 4:4). That kind of cleansing and renewal was precisely the aim of the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ, and it is that kind of cleansing and renewal through Christ's dying and rising which baptism attests. While it is possible that the early Church, or some members of it, viewed baptism as the fulfilment of circumcision for which the prophets looked. This appears to have been true of Paul, and certainly the Jewish Church could have gone along with the latter alternative alone, for according to Acts 21:21-24 the idea of commanding Jews not to circumcise their children was unthinkable for the Church of Jerusalem; they must have maintained both circumcision and baptism for the whole apostolic generation, until the Jewish War scattered the Jewish believers.

The relation of baptism to the redemptive acts of Christ is more important. Verse 12 compels us to acknowledge that "you were buried with him in baptism" continues the thought represented in "putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ." Whether the term "putting off" already implies the thought of baptism in Paul's mind, as in Galatians 3:27 and in Colossians 3:9, it is impossible to say; it cannot be denied that the word *apekdusis* and its corresponding verb *apekduo* were commonly used with baptismal associations, but I am inclined to believe that the language is sufficiently accounted for by the preceding mention of circumcision. The important point, however, is the sequence of participation in Christ's "circumcision" followed by "you were buried in him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God." The believer "put off" the body of flesh "in

⁹ See the instructive article by G. Vermes, "Baptism and Jewish Exegesis: New Light from Ancient Sources," *New Testament Studies*, IV: 309ff., 1958.

the circumcision of Christ," and he was buried with Christ in baptism. The language is pictorial, but it clearly points to the believer's involvement in Christ's death and burial. That is, the believer doesn't simply die *like* Jesus did, and become buried in a pool as Jesus was buried in a tomb; rather he is involved in Christ's gory death, and he is laid in Christ's grave. The primary declaration of baptism therefore is, "*I was with him there, on the cross, and in his grave.*"

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But we must go further. For baptism advances beyond the simple, but momentous affirmation, "When Christ died for me, I died too." Paul adds, "in which you were also raised with him through faith." Now despite valiant attempts to make "in which" mean "in whom," i.e. in Christ, the RSV and NEB (and basically KJV) translators are almost certainly right in keeping to the rendering "in which," namely in baptism.¹⁰ So Paul writes, "in baptism you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God." I cannot make that mean anything less than a declaration that the experience of Christ's resurrection power is known in baptism through faith. Such a view of baptism is (in my judgment) possible only in a context where baptism is set in relation to repentance and faith in the manner, for example, that as one sees on the day of Pentecost, when the turning to the Lord was expressed with and in the baptism, or in the experience of the Philippian jailor, who was baptised on his profession of faith in Christ in the middle of the night, before he sat down to a meal with Paul and the rest of the house (Acts 16: 31ff.). In such a setting baptism is less a testimony to a faith previously received than a declaration of a faith here and now embraced, an embodiment of conversion to Christ, and a submission to him who is able to save. In such a milieu it is not surprising that the spiritual realities of conversion and baptism are merged together, for in that context they do fall together. Hence Paul puts the meaning of Easter into baptism: by faith the believer is one with the risen Lord, in whom the presence of the new creation burst into this one, and by faith he claims for himself the resurrection life of the new world here and now.

What applies to the relation of the believer to Easter naturally holds good of his relation to the events of Good Friday. He is not buried with Christ by virtue of the power of baptism and raised with Christ through the efficacy of faith. The phrase "by faith in the working of God" rules the application of the

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¹⁰ The interpretation of the phrase as "in whom" was upheld by E. von Dobschutz, "Sakrament and Symbol in Urchristentum," Theologische Studien and Kritiken, 1905, p. 4, and appears in the commentaries on Colossians by Rendtorff, Lohmeyer, and Masson, is maintained by R. Schnackenburg, Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: B. Blackwell, c. 1964), pp. 67f.; J.D. Dunn, Baptism in the Holy Spirit (Naperville, Ill.: A. R. Allenson, 1970), pp. 154f., and adopted in the Jerusalem Bible. It is held that the passage reads best if we consistently render the phrase "in him" in vv. 10, 11, 12, especially in vv. 11-12; "in him you were circumcised... in baptism you were buried with him... in him you were also raised with him." While this appears plausible, it raises a number of difficulties. Whereas the text reads, "in him you were circumcised," it conjoins closely the two verbs, "you were buried with him in baptism... raised with him through faith;" the "with him" binds the two verbs together. To read en ho of v. 12 as "in whom" causes a separation between the two elements of baptism: "in baptism you were buried with him, in him you were raised in him." Is the believer then buried with Christ in baptism, but raised with Christ in some other way or time? If it is in Christ that the believer is raised with him, it is also in Christ that he is buried with him, for only in Christ can one participate in the redemptive event; no one more passionately believed this than Paul; if he wanted to convey this meaning, why did he not write it? It is best therefore to construe the text as RSV and NEB have it, and view "in him" of v. 11 as consciously set in parallelism to "in him" of v. 10, and thereby completing it.

whole redemptive action of Christ to the believer. It is God who in Christ was reconciling the world to himself who includes the penitent sinner in that act, and God who in Christ brought into being the new world who raises the believer to new life in it. The function of baptism is to exhibit the saving acts of Christ-his dying and rising-and also objectify the repentance and faith of the believer, who looks to Christ to grant him a share in the efficacy of those saving acts, alike in their past, present and future aspects. The critical significance of the phrase in verse 12, "through faith," has all too often been underestimated by the theologians of baptism. It recalls the related saying in First Peter 3:21, where baptism, prefigured by the flood of Noah, is said to "save" in a carefully defined sense: "not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Here the essence of baptism is viewed as a spiritual transaction, wherein a man addresses God in faith and prayer¹¹ and experiences the power of the resurrection of Christ. Alike in Colossians 2: 12 and First Peter 3:21 a view of baptism as possessing efficacy through its performance is expressly excluded, and any thought of its application to infants is equally alien, for in both passages God's grace meets man in his need on the basis of Christ's redeeming acts and in response to the faith of the baptised. It is, as has been well remarked, an existential participation in what Christ has done for man.¹²

In verse 13 the standpoint changes. The Christian looks back and sees himself now not as dead to sin by virtue of union with the crucified and risen Christ, but as dead in sins through life out of Christ. From that condition he has been mercifully quickened: Christ died and rose for all men, and therefore for him, and in Christ he has come to know that new life, even as his sins have been freely forgiven. Once again, however, the language employed to express the nature of forgiveness is related to the peculiar standpoint of the heretical teaching. Christ has "cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands." The "bond" is an I.O.U., a signed statement of indebtedness; if it applies to the Jew through his acceptance of the Law, it also applies to the Gentile who recognises his obligation to what he knows of the will of God. It means, in the picturesque paraphrase of Moule, "*I owe obedience to God's will, signed Mankind*." This bond stands "against us," for we have all failed to discharge its obligations (cf. Rom. 7:16, 22f.). By becoming man and accepting the death warrant which the bond constituted, Christ has discharged the debt, erased the writing of the bond, and nailed it to his cross to show that it no longer has any force.

With legal ordinances, therefore, the Christian has no more to do. They are finished. Nor has he any cause to quail before cosmic powers, for the Lord

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triumphed over them too. The language of verse 15 is obscure, owing to the difficulty of determining whether the action described is related primarily to Christ's death or to his resurrection. Most think of the former. The NEB translators bring out in a more forceful manner the meaning implied in the RSV: "On the cross he discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment." The value of that translation is that it keeps close to the meaning of *apekdusamenos*—"he stripped off"—the verb which appears in Colossians 3:9 and is

¹¹ Or in faith and confession if we are to translate *eperotema* as "the pledge to God" (to maintain a good conscience or proceeding from a good conscience); see B. Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism* (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1946), pp. 185ff.

¹² G. Bornkamm, "Die neutestamentliche Lehre der Taufe," *Theologische Blätter*, 1938. col. 51.

cognate to the noun rendered in 2:11 "putting off." Lightfoot on this basis interprets the statement, "The powers of evil, which had clung to him like a Nessus robe about his humanity, were torn off and cast aside forever."¹³ It is, however, a somewhat peculiar picture, and for this reason some prefer to view the verb as possessing a middle force, understanding the "robe" which Christ discarded as the flesh, over which the powers have control in this life.¹⁴

I personally consider that the statement reads more simply, and maintains a greater unity of context, if we understand God to be the subject of the verb, as seems to be demanded by verse 13. Paul then states that it is God who made us alive with Christ, forgave us our trespasses, cancelled the I.O.U., and disarmed the powers, leading them in Christ's triumphal procession as he raised him from the dead. This interpretation has the merit of setting verses 13-15 in parallelism with verses 10-12, and is in harmony with other representations of Christ's triumph over the principalities and powers through his resurrection (see e.g. Eph. 1:20f., Phil. 2:9ff., 1 Pet. 3:22).

The closing two paragraphs of Colossians 2:16-23 have been entitled by Masson "A Defence of Christian Liberty." They draw conclusions from the exposition of Christ's redemptive deeds given in verses 8-15 but related at every point to the legalistic notions of the Gnostic teachers. Inevitably false views of the person and work of Christ, such as are presupposed in verses 8-15, lead to conclusions about life and conduct far removed from those of orthodox Christianity. In this passage the Jewish influence on the Gnostic teaching that had entered Colossae is particularly apparent.

Judgments involving scruples about food and drink, festivals, new moons and sabbaths (verse 16) are viewed by Paul as a concern with mere "shadows" of what is to come rather than the reality itself (verse 17). This contrast between Law and Gospel as of shadow and substance is the essential viewpoint of the Letter to the Hebrews, but the characteristic Pauline slant should be observed: "the substance belongs to Christ" (RSV), which is a paraphrase for "the body is Christ's"; this suggests that the realities of which

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the old order knows only the shadows are to be found in the fellowship of the Church, which is Christ's body.

Oddly enough it is people who become obsessed with the "shadows" who are quick to condemn others who do not show the same enthusiasm for their predictions. People who "go in for self-mortification and angel worship and try to enter into some vision of their own... lose hold upon the Head, yet it is from the Head that the whole body... receives its supplies" (verses 18f., NEB). Here is both a warning for the necessity of the individual to adhere to Christ, the Lord and fount of life, and an assurance of the power of the Head to maintain the Body. The relation of the Head to the Body is conceived in terms of authority and source of life or nourishment. The nature of the symbol has been bent by the reality which it has to

¹³ Colossians, *ad loc*.

¹⁴ For example J.A.T. Robinson, *The. Body; a Study in Pauline Theology* (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1952), p. 41: "It is through the *sarx* that death and its forces have control over human nature. The dying Jesus, like a king divests himself of that flesh, the tool and medium of their power, and thereby exposes them to ridicule for their Pyrrhic victory."

express: it is the Lord who enables the Church to grow in unity and maturity, and thus to fulfill God's design.

The final paragraph, verses 20ff., points to the absurdity of the idea that men who had died with Christ, and thus passed out from servitude to the principles of pre-Christian religions (or beyond the reach of the elemental spirits of the universe), should submit themselves to regulations which are bound up with pre-Christian religions, as though they still belonged to a world condemned to pass away instead of to the new creation introduced by the risen Redeemer. The rules to which obedience is demanded "have indeed reputation for wisdom, with their voluntary delight in religiousness and self-mortification and severity to the body, but are of no value in combatting sensual indulgence."¹⁵ Participation in the event of Golgotha through union with Christ has a more cataclysmic effect than the Colossians had realised: it entails a death sentence on the way of life characteristic of the old order, and total submission to the Lord of the new world. Only steadfast adherence to Christ can enable the redeemed unreservedly to renounce the old and joyfully to experience the freedom of the new.

Paul's concern in his Letter to the Colossians finds a remarkable echo in the conclusion of Herbert Butterfield's work on Christianity and History. Pleading that men should recognise what a liberating effect on the mind belief in God has, he ends his book with these words:

"I have nothing to say at the finish except that if one wants a permanent rock in life and goes deep enough for it, it is difficult for historical events to shake it. There are times when we can never meet the future with sufficient elasticity of mind, especially if we are locked in the contemporary systems of thought. We can do worse than remember a principle which both gives us a firm Rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds: the principle: *'Hold to Christ and for the rest be totally uncommitted'*."¹⁶

That is Colossians for Today!

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Prepared for the Web in October 2007 by Robert I Bradshaw.

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¹⁵ Moule's paraphrase of v. 23, *Op. cit., ad loc.*

¹⁶ Christianity and History (London: Bell, 1949), pp. 145f.