

Expositor's Class

Week 2 Word Studies

- Look up the definitions of the word
- Examine how the word is used in Scripture. Keep your eye open for patterns (what contextual clues indicate that it is being used one way or another).
- Paying careful attention to the context, determine the meaning of each word.

Good online tool for looking up Greek words: <http://www.blueletterbible.org/>

Homework:

* Do word studies on the major terms (underlined)

βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν· 9 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς, 10 καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι, ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας,

* Read and highlight the technical commentaries (watch for answers to your questions)

* Write down another 20 observations.

* Write another prayer/psalm (ideally on the same attribute)

* Continue meditating on the passage.

Richard R. Melick New American Commentary

Paul's Defense of the Faith ([2:8–3:4](#))

[Colossians 2:8–3:4](#) presents the theological heart of the epistle. The heresy is exposed and discussed. Paul provided theological answers which formed a basis for Christian living ([2:8–19](#)). He also laid a foundation ([2:20–3:4](#)) for the ethical commands which follow in [3:5ff](#).

Before discussing the contents, an overview of the section is in order. [Colossians 2:8–3:4](#) divides naturally into two sections: [2:8–19](#) and [2:20–3:4](#). The transition is marked by both literary and ideological features. First, the literary features of the section point to these divisions. In [2:8–19](#), three matters demonstrate the relationship. Paul employed his characteristic “therefore” to tie the two paragraphs together into one ([2:16](#)). Further, he addressed in order the two concerns identified in [2:8–15](#), the dominance of supernatural powers and enslavement to the law. Both of these subjects continue in [2:16–19](#). Finally, the commands which form the second paragraph ([2:16–19](#)) complete the theological section ([2:8–15](#)) by identifying proper action on the basis of the teaching of the section. Throughout, the specific teaching of the heretics occupied Paul's thought.

At [2:20](#) a change of patterns occurs. There is a symmetry of organization so that two subjects are introduced by parallel clauses (first class clauses in Greek; “since,” [2:20](#), NIV; cf. [3:1](#)) and completed by commands ([2:20a–23](#); [3:1a–4](#)). The change of pattern from what preceded indicates a new segment in the argument.

Second, the content of the sections indicates a natural division. In [2:8–19](#), Paul addressed the heresies' twofold concerns of the spiritual powers and the law. These points are considered throughout the section. In [3:5](#), however, the content moves from the specifics of the heresy to instructions on how to implement more positive aspects of sanctification. Sandwiched in between these two, Paul spoke to the theology of Christian practice. The two sections of this second argument ([2:20–23](#); [3:1–4](#)) develop the theology of the death ([2:20](#)) and resurrection ([3:1](#)) of Christ. Theological patterns, therefore, reveal the structure. Considering these matters as well as those suggested below, it seems best to divide the passage into theological concerns ([2:8–19](#)) followed by practical concerns ([2:20–3:4](#)).

In this portion of the epistle, Paul was preoccupied with the arguments of his opponents. Both the theological content of the passage and the vocabulary suggest that. A number of words occur either one time or less than five times in the New Testament. In the epistle, Paul used 33 words which are used only one time in his writings. In these verses ([2:8–3:4](#)) 15 occur, which represents 45 percent of these words. The next highest single section of the book contains 5 words, representing 15 percent of the *hapax legomena*. Similarly, a higher number of rare words occurs here than elsewhere in the epistle. Paul used 64 words in Colossians which are found less than 5 times in the New Testament. Of these, 21 occur in [2:8–3:4](#), representing 33 percent. The next highest single section of the book contains 14 words, representing 22 percent. These statistics suggest an unusual Pauline vocabulary. Although the subject matter influences the use of specific words, it is also possible that Paul employed some of the terms the heretics used.

(1) Against the Theological Threat ([2:8–19](#))

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was

against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

¹⁶Therefore 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. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. ¹⁹He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

The theological threat concerned two major tenets of the Christian faith. These were soteriology, the person and work of Christ specifically related to the cross, and sanctification, the application of the cross to the development of personal purity. In this portion of the epistle, Paul addressed the theological foundations of both of these subjects. Thus the text presents the *theology* of salvation (2:8–15) and the *theology* of sanctification (2:16–19). In the next section, Paul addressed the same subjects from a more pastoral perspective. Paul responded to the particular points of attack brought by the opponents. Since he responded to the specific problems at Colosse, some matters of interest to later Christians were not addressed. Paul's discussion was one-sided and confined to the main points of his opponents. Nevertheless, the theology is some of the richest and deepest in the New Testament.

There is a theological unity in these verses. Although Paul spoke of sanctification in these verses, he rooted his discussion in the conversion experience. Typically Paul did not separate the death and resurrection of Jesus. At 2:20–3:4, however, he dissected a unified, historical, and theological truth for the purpose of precise analysis. From a comprehensive perspective, salvation includes conversion, sanctification, and glorification. Further, sanctification and glorification grow out of justification. From another perspective, these may be separated for purposes of discussion and analysis. Since the false teachers attacked Paul's teaching regarding both conversion and Christian growth, Paul discussed each doctrine; this outline reflects that approach. It would be incorrect to assume that sanctification is a second and separate transaction. Even in this discussion, Paul related it to the death and resurrection with Christ. The text makes that point by beginning with an assumption that they died with Christ (2:20), by continuing with implications of their resurrection with Christ to a new life (3:1), and concluding with a reminder that all of it is because of their death with Christ (3:3). Thus, though the commentary seems to separate salvation (conversion) and sanctification (Christian growth), it does so for practical purposes. Christian living is possible because of both the death and resurrection of Christ and their implication together and separately in a believer's life.

TO THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION (2:8–15). The attack of the heretics struck at the heart of the Christian faith. If they were correct, Paul was wrong and his work pointless. Their position was no flawed theory of how to work out salvation; this was a direct attack on the doctrine itself. Paul addressed it with directness and forthrightness.

Two concerns are addressed in this passage: the worship of angels and the practice of the law. The two themes occur in a chiasmic pattern. In vv. 9–10, 15 Paul referred to the supernatural powers which concerned the false teachers. In vv. 11–12, 13–14 he addressed the concerns of the Jewish law. In this organization, two points may be seen. First, since chiasms emphasize the “outside” members, Paul primarily focused on the supernatural powers and their relationship to Christians, even though the discussion of the law occupies more space. Second, the supernatural powers relate to the law. Paul moved easily and freely from one to the other, so his readers would see his connection without difficulty or question. It is correct to assume, therefore, that the law and supernatural powers went together in the minds of the opponents at Colosse. They sought to get the church to submit both to the authority of supernatural powers and to the requirements of the law. Perhaps the connection between the two is the statement Paul made that these are “elementary” (2:8). Paul evaluated both the approach to the law (cf. Gal 4:3 and context) and the worship of angels as elementary. Therefore the “philosophy” had two seemingly diverse teachings which came to the church the same way.

The Nature of the Threat (2:8). 2:8 Paul saw this influx of heresy as a planned, organized attack against Christian theology. He warned against anyone taking the church captive. The situation was real. The approach was both deceitful and ensnaring. It was not an attack from a misguided Christian. This was a purposeful attempt to draw Christians away from their moorings. Paul's metaphor implies that the church was unwillingly being taken (“captured”) by these intruders. This does not suggest that they did not choose to follow the false teachers. The term accentuates the spiritual warfare involved. Perhaps it also stresses the deceitful methods used. In discussing the system, Paul spoke of the medium of the teaching and its measurement.

The false teaching made inroads through a medium that Paul called “hollow and deceptive philosophy.” This is the only time Paul employed the term “philosophy,” although it was a common enough term in the Greek world. Perhaps Paul chose the term because the heresy actually had philosophical roots rather than theological; that is, it may well have come from secular sources rather than religious.

The terms used to define this movement are all closely connected. In Greek, one article connects the terms “hollow and deceptive philosophy” or more literally “the philosophy and empty deceit.” Both the article and the connection between the terms are important. The article points to a specific philosophy, rather than philosophy in general. Although Paul probably had little to say about the positive aspects of philosophy, no evidence in this verse indicates that he opposed the discipline. However, he certainly opposed this particular philosophy. The connection of the two terms also reveals that Paul saw it as an empty and deceitful philosophy. It had no substance. Following it led to nothingness. It was devoid of truth and, therefore, impotent. Strangely, there is little apart from this passage to define the teaching, and it has remained a puzzle for centuries. Whatever it was, it was the medium for destructive heresy which threatened the very life of the church.

Paul described the philosophy in terms of three characteristics which provide a standard of measurement. The parallel statements indicate that the philosophy was human, elementary, and non-Christian.

First, the philosophy was human. The actual wording is that it “depends on human tradition.” Basically, this teaching represented man’s attempts to arrive at the truth. It was, therefore, a nonrevelational attempt to solve ultimate questions of life. Of course, there is nothing wrong with tradition. Paul used this same term in positive ways elsewhere. History has shown many values of tradition. This particular tradition, however, was human in origin, lacking divine truth. That was the destructive element.

Second, it was elementary. Here Paul used the term “basic principles” (*stoi-cheia*), which has a long history of interpretation. Originally, the term referred to the four basic elements of the world: earth, fire, wind, and water. These were often seen in conflict with each other. The term was later used of the basic elements of words, the alphabet. The construction of the alphabet allowed the formation of words and communication of ideas. The word later came to mean the “ABC’s” of something, i.e., the basics. In some teachings, the “elements” were the signs of the zodiac and the powers that occupied the planets. These powers supposedly exerted their influence over the world and its activities. In Jewish circles, the term “elements” often applied to supernatural beings who ruled over people. Some considered them demons. Paul used the term in [Gal 4:9](#), where he confronted false teachers who urged Christians to worship the elementary things. Paul opposed them as “no-gods,” undeserving of worship. Even so, the Galatians were in danger of turning to them.

How did Paul use the term here? Most probably he employed a variation of Jewish terminology since most other elements of the heresy make sense when approached from that perspective (see the introduction to this commentary). He may have referred to angel powers, which were incorrectly perceived as being in authority over the world. Whatever the specific interpretation, the elements were inferior. Christianity brought a higher and better system of worship to its believers.

Third, the philosophy was non-Christian. Perhaps more than the other evaluations, this one points to the heart of the danger. The philosophy was not “according to Christ.” It was incompatible with Christ and contrary to the work he did on the cross. This reason alone would be enough to invalidate the teaching, but collectively the three descriptions decisively expose the nature of the philosophy.

The most serious error of the false teachers at Colosse was that they went about their spiritual lives with only natural insight. They did not go to God to learn of him, nor did they learn from the revelation of Christ that was available to them.

The Answer to the Threat (2:9–15). In answer to the teaching of the heretics, Paul focused on the person and work of Christ. Throughout the section, the two points of reference for the heretical teaching remain the supernatural powers and the law. The work of Christ relates to both of these.

Paul taught that there is a strong spiritual connection between Christ and believers. What Jesus did in providing redemption, believers did with him in God’s mind. They are in Christ, and he is in them. This relationship brings many spiritual benefits. Paul emphasized the importance of this relationship by employing the “in him” phrase or a similar expression frequently in vv. [9–15](#). Paul saw the false teachers as a threat to the work of Christ and the union of believers with Christ. To counter them, Paul described Christ as the sufficient Savior ([2:9–14](#)) and Christ as the sovereign Savior ([2:15](#)).

Beginning with Jesus, the sufficient Savior, Paul logically progressed from Jesus’ work in relation to the law to his domination over other spiritual beings. [Colossians 2:9](#) introduces all of these ideas. It relates to the law in that Jesus’ work is useless without an understanding of his person. Primarily, however, it relates to his unique place in

relation to created beings. This means that vv. [9](#), [15](#) belong together logically and vv. [10–14](#) form a unit which presents two aspects of Jesus' work. Nevertheless, the order of the text will be followed in the exposition, even though the thematic arrangement follows the chiasm.

[2:9](#) Jesus is completely God. The first concern of the section is the translation of v. [9](#), “In Christ the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” The NIV translation takes the most direct approach to the Greek text, which solves the most problems and creates the least. “The fullness” is the subject of the verb “lives.” Some translators supply “God” as the subject and translate, “God has caused the fullness to live in him.” There is no need to insert what is not in the text, however, when the text is clear enough.

The greater question here is whether “the fullness” is used in a technical sense, possibly expressing the ideas of the philosophy. If it is, the term “fullness” describes the totality of the emanations from deity which were a part of the Gnostic and possibly pre-Gnostic system of thought. The proponents argue that wherever the term occurs it has Gnostic associations. They contend that this context supports that conclusion. If this were the case, Paul's arguments would effectively diffuse the philosophy. The context, however, does not demand Gnostic definitions. It would be as difficult to conceive of all the emanations of deity residing in Jesus bodily as it would to consider him divine, as Paul did here. Further, for Gnostics, the emanations were progressively “less divine,” until one emerged that was able to create the material world. The Gnostics would hardly consider that the higher and lower could coexist in one being. The basic difficulty is that Paul argued for the deity of Jesus, and to understand *plērōma* in a Gnostic way would mean that Jesus is separate from God. No matter how great the beings of the “aeons” were, they were less than and other than God himself. There are, therefore, significant problems in taking a technical, philosophical understanding of the term.

Paul meant that the fullness of deity dwells in Christ. The expression is unusual, but the God-man relationship cannot be expressed well in human language. The fullness of deity was Paul's way of stating that Jesus is every bit God. On the other hand, Paul avoided modalistic language. The fullness refers to the completeness of the divine nature, but it does not mean that Christ is all there is of God. In fact, the word for God chosen by Paul expresses deity, not divine nature. Jesus is every bit God but does not exhaust the dimensions of deity. Father and Spirit are equally divine. Finally, Paul identified the location of this fullness. It is “in bodily form.” This expression, like the others, has given rise to multiple translations and interpretations. The point of tension is that the verb “lives” occurs in the present tense so that Paul stated that Jesus *now* has the fullness of deity in bodily form. Many, therefore, have taken the expression “bodily” in a spiritual or metaphorical sense. They say it means something like “totally.” The problem with that is that Paul generally used the word “body” (*sōma*) for the real body. Thus, with Lightfoot, it seems best to understand that the fullness of God lives in Jesus in bodily form. In the “form” of Christ we have the reality of God. The tie between God the Father and Jesus Christ is that they share deity. This expresses some of Paul's high Christology.

[2:10](#) Anticipating the thoughts that follow (vv. [13–15](#)), Paul stated that “you have been given fullness in Christ” ([2:10](#)). The same root for the word “fullness” occurs here and in v. [9](#) (the “fullness” dwells in him). Although this is an obvious play on words, it is equally obvious that Paul did not mean the Colossian Christians were elevated to the same stature as Jesus. Nor did he mean that any one Christian became deity. He rather picked up the generic use of the term to state that, just as Jesus was fully God, believers are fully complete in him. Nothing lacks in salvation. The understanding of salvation may grow, and the appropriation of the blessings of salvation may increase; but in Christ, they had all there was, the “fullness” of salvation.

The support for this statement follows in the second portion of the verse. The truth is rooted in Jesus' position as head over powers and authorities. Calling to mind [1:16](#) (see the notes there), Paul used the term “Head” to express Jesus' relationship to these powers. Scholars debate whether the term “Head” implies primarily the source of the powers' and authorities' existence or Christ's position of authority. Although the term may have application to either, there is normally a blending of the two so that the terms are not mutually exclusive. Thus, while it is true that principalities and powers owe their existence to Jesus, it is equally true that they are subject to him. Paul explicitly stated that in v. [15](#). There was no reason for any allegiance to other supernatural beings. Since the Colossian believers were complete in Jesus, and he is greater than these beings, the believers had no relationship to spirit powers. Paul returned to this discussion in [2:15](#). It was enough for him to anticipate that later discussion here by stating that since Jesus is God, he surpasses all created beings. Those related to him by faith share in his lofty position. They have a complete salvation.

They were completely saved ([2:11–14](#)). These four verses contain two subjects relevant to the Jewish audience Paul addressed: the covenant, which was symbolized by circumcision, and the law. These two reference points stand for all the requirements of the law. There is a logical relationship between the two. One recalls the entrance to the

legal system; the other recalls the continued life it expects. These aspects form the basis for Paul's discussion of the Christian life. There is an entrance (baptism into Christ) and a continuing (life by faith). Using Old Testament imagery, Paul explained that God took care of the old life at conversion ([2:11–12](#)) and that he provided for the new life at the same time ([2:13–14](#)). These two aspects of Christian living are compared respectively to circumcision ([2:11–12](#)) and the law ([2:13–14](#)).

[2:11](#) The first requirement of the law, circumcision, introduced a Jew to all of the law's obligations. Conversely, the Jews taught that no one could keep the requirements of the law without having been circumcised. Every Jewish boy was circumcised, and it was the first responsibility of a male proselyte. Paul defined circumcision in v. [11](#) and related it to baptism in v. [12](#). His discussion is Christological and spiritual, rather than physical and legal.

Paul's definition of circumcision included three elements: spiritual circumcision, putting off sinful nature, and the circumcision of Christ. First, he spoke of spiritual circumcision, defining the believer's circumcision as "unhandmade" ("not ... done by the hands of men," NIV). Three times the word "unhandmade" occurs in the New Testament; twice it was used by the apostle Paul. In [Mark 14:58](#), it describes the temple Jesus would raise up after his death. He referred to a spiritual temple not built by men. In [2 Cor 5:1](#), Paul referred to the body ("building") of heaven as unhandmade. He contrasted the natural earthly body ("handmade") and the supernatural, heavenly body ("unhandmade"). In the reference from Jesus in Mark, the word described spiritual rather than physical temples. Further, "unhandmade" implies "of divine working" rather than human. Both of these references contain the same idea. The third use is in [Col 2:11](#), where Paul contrasted the circumcision of the body ("handmade") and a circumcision which is not on the body ("unhandmade"). This, like the other two occurrences, points to a spiritual reality. It is a spiritual act done by God himself.

The concept of spiritual circumcision began in the Old Testament and continued in Paul's writings. The longest discussion occurs in [Rom 2:17ff.](#) (esp. [2:29](#)) where Paul contended that God desires the circumcision of the heart, not the body. The Old Testament had stated as much earlier ([Deut 30:6](#)). Physical circumcision had value only when the heart was also committed. The Old Testament spoke of this circumcision, a circumcision beyond the law, which the law's circumcision pictured. Two streams of thought developed. Some took it literally and became legalistic. Others, like Paul, understood the spiritual nature of the law. They assumed the spiritual reality which circumcision symbolized. Since it was a matter of the heart, not the body, it had to be spiritual.

The second element in the definition of circumcision is translated by the NIV as "in the putting off of the sinful nature" ([2:11](#)). Literally the phrase reads, "the putting off of the body of flesh." Typically for Paul, the term "body" referred to the physical body. He did not use the word metaphorically, meaning something like "the mass of flesh." In contrast, however, Paul did use the word "flesh" in a moral sense. The word usually identified the moral principle which characterizes humanity (flesh). Thus, the statement here refers to putting off the fallenness that guides people naturally, i.e., apart from the moral insight that comes from the Holy Spirit.

Some interpret this passage as continuing the strong Christological focus, rather than having a focus on the believer. They say that the "putting off" refers to Christ's death, at which time he put off his physical body. Further, the "circumcision of Christ" may refer to his death, when the spiritual circumcision was effected. Several arguments speak against that. First, the subject of the passage is the Colossian believers ("you"). The most natural reading is that they were the ones to whom this happened. Second, the parallels to [Rom 6](#) suggest that Paul meant this to refer to the believer. Third, it would be an awkward way for Paul to refer to the death of Christ. If it did refer to Christ, the term "flesh" must be understood literally as "physical body" rather than the "sinful nature" of the NIV (which is a poor translation at any rate). Fourth, [2:15](#) states that Christ "disarmed the powers and authorities." This is hard to see as parallel to [2:11](#). Surely the parallel is in [3:9](#) in reference to the believers who had "taken off [their] old self." It is best to see Paul as speaking to the Colossians and their "circumcision."

Paul used similar terminology in [Rom 6](#), where he stated that the "body of sin should be paralyzed" or "done away with" ([6:6](#)). Both passages are set in the context of the believer's baptism, both refer to the morality that characterizes non-Christians, and both speak to new possibilities for the Christian. The body is the instrument of sin and righteousness ([Rom 6](#)). Before conversion, sin dominates. After conversion, the body progressively adapts to new purposes and functions. The body is a primary focus of Christian commitment ([Rom 12:1](#)). Therefore, the phrase "body of flesh" refers to the fallenness that rules in and through the physical body. That principle has been put away at baptism.

The NIV translation may confuse the English reader by calling the state of pre-Christian existence a "nature." In fact, the term "nature" is an awkward one since it seldom communicates effectively. If the term "nature" means *a characteristic way of acting*, the translation "nature" is correct. At conversion, a believer begins to act a new way,

giving evidence of a new nature. The term, however, is confusing because of the way it is often used by modern Christians. Many refer to an old nature and a new nature which are co-resident within the believer. Such an understanding confuses this passage. The old nature has been put off at the believer's circumcision, and it is no longer present. This subject becomes a primary concern in [3:5ff](#). The third element is the statement "with the circumcision done by Christ." The Greek text says simply the "circumcision of Christ." However, the use of the term "unhandmade" earlier calls for an understanding of someone who is able to construct without hands, (i.e., without human involvement). Sometimes that person is God himself; here it is Christ. Therefore, the circumcision is done by Christ as he operates on the hearts of believers to separate them from the world. This phrase can hardly be interpreted as the circumcision Christ endured, even though association with Christ permeates the passage. In summary, circumcision is defined as spiritual, affecting the moral principle of flesh, and performed by the Lord himself.

IV. Warning Against Error (2:8-23)

The apostle now makes his most direct attack against "the Colossian heresy." The entire passage bristles with exegetical difficulties, and calls for closer attention to its wording and argument than any other part of the Epistle.

The tone of the passage is both admonitory and affirmative, but admonition is the prevailing note sounded throughout. The affirmations, which mainly concern Christ and his sufficiency (cf. [vv. 9-15](#)), form the basis on which the warnings are issued and give point and power to them.

It is characteristic of Paul in Colossians to use the vocabulary of his opponents, though, as H. Chadwick has well stated it, "in a different and disinfected sense" (NTS, 1:272). Instances of this in the present passage may be "philosophy" (2:8), "fullness" (2:9), "Deity" (2:9), "powers and authorities" (2:15), "humility" (2:18), "disqualify" (2:18), "self-imposed worship" (2:23).

A. The Error of False Philosophy (2:8-15)

1. The warning stated (2:8)

8 Paul first warns against being taken captive through a false philosophy. "See to it" alerts the readers to the danger. NEB has "Be on your guard." The singular "no one" leads some interpreters to conclude that Paul had in mind a particular person, perhaps the leader, among the heretical teachers. The words translated "that no one takes you captive" (*me tis hymas estai sylagogon*) use an indicative verb and point to a real, not merely a supposable, danger. The word translated "takes captive" (*sylagogon*), which was regularly used of taking captives in war and leading them away as booty, depicts the false teachers as "men-stealers" wishing to entrap the Colossians and drag them away into spiritual enslavement.

"Through hollow and deceptive philosophy" expresses the means by which the errorists attempted to do this. This is the only occurrence of the word *philosophy* in the NT. It would, of course, be a mistake to conclude that Paul intended his statement to be a condemnation of all philosophy. The word (*philosophia*) is a noble one, literally meaning "love of wisdom." Here, however, because the reference is to the Colossian error, it has a derogatory connotation.

Paul uses three descriptive phrases to characterize this "hollow and deceptive" system, and each constitutes a reason for its rejection. First, it is "after [according to] the tradition of men" (NIV, "depends on human tradition"). By "tradition" (*paradosirz*) Paul may mean the mass of oral tradition the Jews had engrafted on the written law. It is more likely, however, that the term refers to various pagan theories current in that day. The apostle asserts that these, not divine revelation, were the bases of the "philosophy" of the Colossian errorists. Second, it was a philosophy that "depends on ... the basic principles of this world." "Basic principles" translates (*stoicheia*), a word of multiple meanings. Originally it denoted the letters of the alphabet, its root meaning being "things in a row." The term then came to be used of the elements ("ABC's") of learning (cf. [Gal 4:3](#), ASV, NASB, NIV; [Heb 5:12](#), ASV, TCNT, NASB, NIV), of the physical elements of the world (cf. [2 Peter 3:10](#)), of the stars and other heavenly bodies (cf. [2 Peter 3:10](#), Moff., Am. Trans.), and of the elemental spirits, that is, the supernatural powers believed by many ancients to preside over and direct the heavenly bodies (cf. [Gal 4:3](#), RSV, NEB). The sense in the present passage may be either the elements of learning (NIV, "basic principles") or the elemental spirits (RSV).

If the former sense is intended, the whole statement means that the Colossian system, though represented by its proponents as advanced "philosophy," was really only rudimentary instruction, the ABC's of the world—that is to say, it was elementary rather than advanced, earthly rather than heavenly. The rendering "elemental spirits" (cf. RSV, Moff.) is, however, to be preferred. Understood in this manner, the passage means either (1) that the "philosophy" of the errorists was a system instigated by the elemental spirits (perhaps thought of as the powers of evil) or (2) that it was a system having the elemental spirits as its subject matter. The second meaning is more likely the one intended by Paul, for we know from 2:18 that the Colossian heresy made much of the "worship of angels." Third, it was a system "not after [according to] Christ" (lit. translation). This is Paul's most telling criticism of the teaching at Colosse. The meaning is that the "philosophy" of the heretics did not accord with the truth as it is revealed in Christ. He is the standard by which all doctrine is to be measured, and any system, whatever its claims, must be rejected if it fails to conform to the revelation God has given us in him.

2. The warning justified (2:9-15)

Paul's warning rests on the fact of Christ's unshared supremacy (v. 9) and his complete adequacy to meet human need (vv. 10-15). Because of who he is and what we find in him, any system "not after Christ" must be wrong. The passage takes up the central phrase of 1:19 ("fullness") and draws out its consequences in relation to the Colossian heresy. Bruce gives his discussion of it the heading "Christ is all—and all you need" (p. 228).

a. The full deity of Christ (2:9a)

9a Nearly every word in this statement is significant. "For," linking this and the following verses to v. 8, shows that the warning there rests on what is said here about Christ and his fullness. The phrase "in Christ" (see comment at 1:2), by its position within the sentence, is emphatic, the thought being that in Christ alone the fullness of deity dwells. "Lives" (lit., "dwells") translates *katoikei*, a verb that suggests taking up permanent residence. The tense is present, stating a general truth and denoting continuous action. The full thought, then, is that in Christ the fullness of deity permanently resides, finding in him "a settled and congenial home" (H.C.G. Moule, p. 144). The context suggests that the primary reference is to Christ in his present glorified state. As Robertson puts it, "The fullness of the Godhead ... dwells 'in the once mortal, now glorified body of Christ' (Ellicott), now 'the body of his glory' (Philippians 3:21)" (p. 81).

"Fullness" translates *pleroma*, a word used earlier in 1:19 (see comment there). Here it is defined by the addition of *tes theotetos* ("of the Deity"). The word *theotetos* is found only here in the NT, though a similar but weaker word (*theiotes*, denoting divine nature) is found in Romans 1:20. *Theotetos* is an abstract term, meaning not just divine qualities and attributes but the very essence of God—"the whole glorious total of what God is, the supreme Nature in its infinite entirety" (H.C.G. Moule, p. 144).

b. The real humanity of Christ (2:9b)

9b The preceding statement (v. 9a) corresponds to John 1:1, "the Word was God"; v. 9b corresponds to John 1:14, "the Word became flesh." The fullness of deity dwells in Christ "in bodily form," that is, in incarnate fashion. This fullness, to be sure, resided in the preincarnate Word (cf. John 1.1ff.), but not in bodily fashion.

c. The complete adequacy of Christ (2:10-15)

10 This statement crowns Paul's argument. Because Christ is fully God and really man, believers, in union with him, "are made full" (ASV), that is, share in his fullness. "In Christ" (lit., "in him"), a phrase denoting vital union with the Savior, is by its position in Greek emphatic.

"Ye are made full," writes Calvin, "does not mean that the perfection of Christ is transfused into us, but that there are in him resources from which we may be filled, that nothing be wanting in us" (p. 183). Thus, in union with Christ our every spiritual need is fully met. Possessing him, we possess all. There was no need, therefore, for the Colossians to turn to the "philosophy" of the errorists, the ritual of the Mosaic law, or to the spirit-beings worshiped by the pagan world. All they needed was in Jesus Christ. As Charles Wesley put it, "Thou, O Christ, art all I want, / More than all in Thee I find."

Paul goes on to affirm the all-sufficiency of Christ by stating that he is "the head over every power and authority." He is "the head" in the sense that he is the source of life for all that exists and sovereign Lord over it all. Whatever powers there are in the universe, whatever ranks and orders of authority and government, they all owe their being to Christ and are under his lordship. It is important to observe that though Christ is here described as Head, the powers and authorities are not called his body. That distinction is reserved for Christ's people.

11-15 The thought of Christ's sufficiency, expounded in detail in [vv. 11-15](#), is now stressed by the mention of three things Christ (or God in Christ) has done for us. These have to do with spiritual circumcision ([vv. 11, 12](#)), forgiveness of sins ([vv. 13, 14](#)), and victory over the forces of evil ([v. 15](#)).

PETER OBRIEN - Word Biblical Commentary

Translation

⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, established in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thanksgiving.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive by means of a hollow, deceptive philosophy, which depends on mere human tradition, derived from the elemental powers of the world and not from Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰and you have been filled in him who is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ. ¹²You were buried with him in baptism; in him you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. ¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴having canceled the IOU which, because of the regulations, was against us and stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵Having stripped the principalities and powers of their authority and dignity God exposed their utter helplessness for all to see, leading them in his triumphal procession in Christ.

Notes

^aAlthough the reading ἐν αὐτῇ ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ has strong manuscript support [B D^c H K *Byz Lect*, some of the versions, etc] it is probably a copyist's assimilation to 4:2, while the alternate reading ἐν αὐτῷ is probably a subsequent modification because of the preceding phrase ἐν αὐτῷ ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ appears to have been the original reading; cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 622.

Form/Structure/Setting

As he begins his interaction with the “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία) of the false teachers, the apostle admonishes the addressees to continue in the teaching they had received and to remain immovable in their faith (2:6, 7). These two verses, which summarize much of what has preceded (Lähnemann, *Kolossenerbrief*, 49) and which lay the foundation for the attack on the Colossian heresy that follows, contain an introductory subordinate clause (v 6, ὥς οὖν παρελάβετε τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον, “so then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord”) and a longer principal clause (vv 6b, 7) consisting of an imperative, three participial expressions joined by καί (“and”), a parenthesis and a concluding participial expression (Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene*, 50; cf. Bujard, *Untersuchungen*, 74–76, 80–86, regarding the literary style of vv 6–15):

At verse 8 the community is confronted with the first of several warnings that will demand of it clear, unequivocal decisions. The imperative βλέπετε (“beware”) is followed by what is, in effect, a sentence of prohibition and by using two sets of prepositional phrases in synonymous parallelism the means by which the false teachers intend to carry out their plan to ensnare the congregation is mentioned:

The conclusion of the verse is brief and pungent, presenting a sharp antithesis to what has immediately preceded: καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν (“and not according to Christ”).

Verses 9 and 10, in which language from the hymn is taken up (ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κτλ.) spell out why (καί) the “philosophy” of the false teachers is “not according to Christ.” Two reasons

are given in separate clauses, linked by καί (“and”), where there is a play on ἐν αὐτῷ (“in him”) and πλήρωμα (“fullness”):

Paul continues (vv 11, 12) the theme of incorporation in Christ. Having mentioned that the readers have been “filled in him,” he elaborates on this by asserting that they have participated in Christ’s death, burial and resurrection:

Verse 13 marks a change in the section. There is a switch in the subject from “you” to “he”; God has made you who were dead to be alive with Christ. Again a sharp contrast is drawn between the readers’ pre-Christian past (καὶ ὑμεῖς νεκροὺς ὄντας ... τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, “also you who were dead ...”) and their present standing in Christ, brought about by God’s action (συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ, “he made you alive together with him”).

In the latter half of the verse there is a further change to “us” and “our” from “you” (i.e. from the second person to the first), and several scholars have concluded that verses 13c–15, in which traditional Christian formulations appear, are a fragment of a confession constructed in hymnic phrases which the author appropriated, since it clearly expressed for him the essential connection between the forgiveness of sins and victory over the principalities and powers (so Lohse, 106, 107; also *Einheit*, 276–84; cf. Martin, *Reconciliation*, 1974, 116–24).

Schille (*Hymnen*, 31–37; cf. Lohmeyer, 100–102) had previously argued that a redeemer or baptismal hymn underlay verses 9–15 but this view has been rejected even by those who detect hymnic elements in verses 13–15. Verses 9, 10b are not the beginning of a hymn (the ὅτι is causal, not recitative) but rather an explanatory resumption of chapter 1:15–20 (note the critiques of Deichgräber, *Gottes hymnus*, 167–69, and Lohse, *Einheit*, 277–79). Wengst too (*Formeln*, 186–94) assumed that verses 13–15 were based on a continuous traditional piece. However, to demonstrate that the hymn consisted of three verses each containing three lines (vv 13, 14, 15) he is obliged to change the text (the “you” was originally “we” and the expression “the uncircumcision of your flesh” is dropped out), but these adjustments are not convincing.

Lohse’s structuring of the passage has the merit of drawing to our attention the relationship of the participles to the finite verbs in verses 14 and 15 (ἐξαλειψας ... ἥρκεν ... προσλώσας, “having canceled ... he took away ... nailing”; and ἀπεκδυσάμενος ... ἐδειγμάτισεν ... θιαμβεύσας, “having disarmed ... he made a spectacle ... leading in his triumphal procession”), but this does not commit us to a hymnic confession underlying verses 13c–15. The linguistic argument is two-edged. For if the passage contains words that occur either rarely or nowhere else in the NT (cf. Lohse, 106) then it is unusual to speak of the author adopting “traditional formulations.” The problem of the source of these expressions remains, and it might as well have been Paul as some unknown disciple—at least he does use the verb θιαμβεύω (2 Cor 2:14; he is the only NT writer to have done so).

Nevertheless verses 13c–15 are difficult to structure; in verse 13 a contrast is drawn: καὶ ὑμεῖς νεκροὺς ὄντας ... συνεζωοποίησεν, “and you who were dead ... he made alive.” The participle χαρισάμενος which introduces the statement about the forgiveness of sins is probably causal (though some have suggested it is explanatory, see the exegesis below), while each of the two finite verbs in verses 14 and 15 is preceded and followed by a participle (see above).

It remains to draw attention to the “in Christ (him)” motif which runs like a scarlet thread through the whole passage (the significance of which is assessed below): ἐν αὐτῷ (“in him,” vv 6, 7, 9, 10, 15); ἐν ᾧ (“in whom,” vv 11, 12; cf. αὐτῷ, “him,” v 12, and αὐτῷ, “with him,” v 13). That the paragraph should begin with this important phrase ἐν σὺν αὐτῷ and end on a similar note suggests we have an example of *inclusio*, i.e. the text closes on the same note as its beginning.

Comment (2:8–15)

8. βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν. By means of a strong warning (βλέπετε here means: “beware,” “be on your guard,” BAG, 143; other examples are: Mark 13:9; Phil 3:2; 2 John 8) the congregation is alerted to the dangers touched upon in verse 4. They are to be on guard *lest* (normally the expression is μή, etc with the subjunctive: 1 Cor 8:9; 10:12; Gal 5:15; cf. Mark 13:5; Acts 13:40; Heb. 12:25; but here the future indicative is employed: BDF para. 369[2]; Moule, *Idiom Book*, 139; Moulton, *Grammar*, 192, understands it as a cautious assertion meaning “perhaps,” but the contexts suggest it is stronger than this) anyone carry them off as booty or spoil. Although no one is named (Bruce, 230, suggests Paul possibly had one particular teacher in view; cf. Masson, 121) both writer and readers would have been able to identify the person(s) concerned (cf. Lightfoot, 176, on this use of the indefinite τις). The verb συλαγωγέω is a rare word—appearing nowhere else in the NT—probably meaning “carry off as booty” or “as a captive” (so BAG, 776; cf. Lightfoot, 176) rather than “rob” or “despoil.” Accordingly the word is used figuratively of carrying someone away from the truth into the slavery of error. The term is a vivid one and shows how seriously Paul regarded the evil designs of those trying to influence the congregation.

διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης. The method (διὰ) by which these spiritual confidence tricksters might ensnare the community is through using “philosophy and empty deceit.” The term “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία) which occurs only here in the NT (the cognate φιλόσοφος, “philosopher,” is used of the Epicureans and the Stoics at Acts 17:18), carried a wide range of meanings describing all sorts of groups, tendencies and viewpoints within the Greek and Jewish worlds (Michel, *TDNT* 9, 172–88), from the Greek pursuit of knowledge and wisdom to the sects of Hellenistic Judaism which sought to present themselves as “philosophies” (so Philo designated the Torah as “the ancestral philosophy [ἡ πάτριος φιλοσοφία,” *Leg.* 156; “the philosophy according to Moses [ἡ κατὰ Μωϋσῆν φιλοσοφία],” *Mut* 223; while Josephus described the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes as the three philosophies [τρεῖς φιλοσοφίαι] within Judaism, *Bell.* 2.119; *Ant.* 18.11; for details see Bornkamm, *Conflict*, 140).

As Bornkamm (*TDNT* 4, 808–10) and Lohse (95) have pointed out, various religious groups sought to convince men that they were imparting philosophy. Even those who practiced magic called themselves “philosophers” as they sought by rights, initiations and magical spells to capture the allegiance of men.

Paul no doubt adopted the term here because it was used by the false teachers themselves to refer to their own teachings in a positive way (cf. Wilckens, *TDNT* 7, 523). But by the addition of the words “and empty deceit” (καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης: the use of the one preposition διὰ and the absence of the definite article before the second noun ἀπάτης show that the apostle is describing this particular philosophy and making no comment on philosophy in general, a point already noted by Clement of Alexandria, *Strom* 6.8.62; cf. Bengel 2, 460) he exposes it as a hollow sham, having no true content, seductive and misleading (ἀπάτη can describe the seduction which comes from wealth, Mark 4:19; the deceitfulness of sin, Heb. 3:13; wicked deception generally, 2 Thess 2:10 or deceptive desires, Eph 4:22; cf. BAG, 81). As “deceitful” it stands opposed to the gospel, “the word of *truth*” (1:5), and to “wisdom and knowledge” (2:3), while the designation of it as “empty” (κενή) sets this philosophy in sharp contrast to the mystery and its “glorious riches” (τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης, 1:27), and Christ in whom all the *treasures* (θησαυροί) of wisdom and knowledge are hidden (2:3).

κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων. The false teaching is next described with reference to its source—“the tradition of *men*.” The teaching of the Greek philosophers, from Plato onward, was passed on from teacher to pupil (e.g. *Theaet* 36, 198b). Further, the “philosophy” to which the mysteries referred was also preserved by means of sacred tradition, so that in the initiation rites the devotee received the holy teaching or “sacred word” (ἱερὸς λόγος) through which the divine revelation came. Later Gnostics used the term παράδοσις (“tradition”) of the authoritative teachings which, as revelation, were to be preserved and passed on (for detailed examples see Dellings, *TDNT* 4, 12, Wegenast, *Verständnis*, 123–26, and Lohse, 95,

96). The importance of tradition in Judaism, described in the m 'Abot... as “a fence around the law” (3:14), has already been noted (see 105).

It is not possible from an examination of this phrase alone (ἡ παράδοσις τῶν ἀνθρώπων) to determine the precise content of the “tradition.” The words might be Jewish or Gentile or both. At Mark 7:8 the same phrase refers to Pharisaic expositions of the Jewish law, while at 1 Peter 1:18 (πατ ροπαράδοτος) it is probably Gentile (though some have argued that this too is Jewish). In both places the vanity or emptiness of such traditions is stressed (Bruce, 231). A decision regarding the content at Colossians 2:8 can only be made by reference to other parts of the letter. But the manner in which the words are introduced here does suggest that the false teachers had set forth their “philosophy” as “tradition” (παράδοσις), thereby pointing to its antiquity, dignity and revelational character (cf. Michel, *TDNT* 9, 186). Paul, however, rejects any suggestion of divine origin. This was a human fabrication standing over against the apostolic tradition which centered on “Christ Jesus as Lord.” Its false content was “according to the elements of the universe and not according to Christ.”

κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν. See the following note on στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου where it is argued, with the majority of recent commentators, that the phrase denotes the “elemental spirits of the universe,” the principalities and powers which sought to tyrannize over the lives of men (cf. 2:10, 15). The phrase probably held an important place in the syncretistic “tradition” of the philosophy. The apostle sets a stark contrast: whatever is in accordance with these demonic, personal powers stands over against Christ, the one at the center of the apostolic tradition, and the person who embodies God’s mystery.

9. ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς. Paul continues his polemical thrust as he makes plain to the readers why (ὅτι) the “philosophy” of the false teachers is “not according to Christ” (the ὅτι is causal, though it is not attached to the βλέπετε of v 8 as if to give the reason for the warning; the view of Schille, *Hymnen*, 31–37, especially 31, that it is a recitative ἵτι introducing a hymnic piece is rightly criticized by Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus*, 167–69; cf. Lähnemann, *Kolossierbrief*, 115; on the question of a hymn in vv 9–15 see above). He focuses attention on the centrality of Christ, whom the readers are to follow unswervingly, by resuming the phrase “in him” (ἐν αὐτῷ) of verse 7 and repeating it as a theme in the following verses (Lohse, 99). In fact it runs like a scarlet thread through this whole section, verses 9–15: “in him” (ἐν αὐτῷ) the entire fullness of deity dwells bodily (v 9); “in him” (ἐν αὐτῷ) you are filled (v 10); “in whom” (ἐν ᾧ) you have been circumcised (v 11); “with him” (αὐτῷ συν-) you have been buried, “in whom” (ἐν ᾧ) you also have been raised with him (v 12); God has made you alive “with him” (σὺν αὐτῷ, v 13); and he has led the principalities and powers in triumphal procession “in him” (ἐν αὐτῷ, v 15).

In this statement of verse 9, words from the earlier hymn (1:19) are taken up and applied (but not “corrected” as some, such as Lähnemann, *Kolossierbrief*, 115, suppose) with reference to the Colossian heresy: note the repetition of ἐν αὐτῷ (“in him”) in an emphatic position, the verb κατοικέω (“dwells”) and πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα (“all the fullness”). The high Christological statement serves as the basis for the application to the particular needs of the congregation. Here, we note several significant points: (1) κατοικέω (“dwells”) is used in the present tense; (2) the genitive “of deity” (τῆς θεότητος) more precisely determines the meaning of “fullness,” while (3) the addition of σωματικῶς (“bodily”) indicates the manner in which the fullness dwells in Christ.

Although there was some doubt at chapter 1:19 as to whether πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα (“all the fullness”) was the subject of the verb εὐδόκησεν (“was pleased”) no such ambiguity exists here: πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα is the subject of κατοικεῖ so indicating that the entire fullness of deity dwells in Christ. As noted above, the expression “the entire (πᾶν τό) fullness” is tautologous and this suggests Paul is writing polemically to underscore the point that the “pleroma” is to be found exclusively in Christ (on the meaning of πλήρωμα see 51–53).

τῆς θεότητος. The additional words “of deity” specify *what* dwells in Christ in its entire fullness. θεότης (“deity”), is the abstract noun from ὁ θεός (“God”) and is to be distinguished from ἡ θεϊότης (“divine nature,” “quality”), the abstract from θεῖος (“divine,” Rom 1:20; Wisd 18:19; cf. Lightfoot, 179, who illustrates the difference between the two nouns in Plutarch’s *Moralia*). The former is *deitas*, the being God, i.e. the divine essence or Godhead; the latter is *divinitas*, i.e. the divine quality, godlikeness (Meyer, 358). Meyer adds: “Accordingly, the *essence* of God, undivided and in its whole fullness, dwells in Christ in His exalted state, so that He is the essential and adequate image of God (i. 15), which He could not be if He were not possessor of the divine “essence”.

Some recent exegetes have objected to the traditional exegesis of this phrase claiming that the deity of Jesus Christ is not to be interpreted in static, ontological categories such as those of “substance” or “essence,” but in soteriological and eschatological thought forms that refer to God’s working in Christ. It is true that in the immediate context the notion of fullness as being imparted to the readers is in view (so v 10). However, the reception of salvation, described in verse 10 as being filled in him alone, becomes meaningful only if he is the one in whom the plenitude of deity is embodied. If the fullness of deity does not reside in him then the Colossians’ fullness would not amount to much at all—the very point Paul is making over against the errorists’ teaching on fullness. Further, a functional Christology presupposes, and finds its ultimate basis in, an ontological Christology (Harris, in NIDNTT, 3, 1193).

κατοικεῖ ... σωματικῶς. As distinct from chapter 1:19 where the aorist εὐδόκησεν κατοικῆσαι (“was pleased to dwell”) occurs, here the present tense κατοικεῖ (“dwells”) indicates that the whole fullness of God resides in the resurrected and exalted Christ (cf. Schweizer, 108). The adverb of manner σωματικῶς indicates how the fullness of deity dwells in Christ, but there is considerable difference of opinion as to its meaning. Moule (92–94), for example, has listed five options:

- i. “as an organized body,” i.e. the totality of the Godhead is “not distributed through a hierarchy of beings,” but is gathered into one “organism” in Christ.
- ii. “expressing itself through the Body [of Christ, i.e. the Church].”
- iii. “actually”—in concrete reality, not in mere seeming.
- iv. “in essence.”
- v. “assuming a bodily form,” “becoming incarnate.”

View (i) suits the hypothesis that Paul had taken the term πλήρωμα from the vocabulary of the false teachers, but is not wholly dependent on it, if the “philosophy” at Colossae taught that the divine attributes were spread throughout the many heavenly powers of which Christ was one. But there are some doubts as to whether this was actually taught. Further, to express the organization in Christ of all these powers by a single adverb, Moule (93) rightly claims, is doubtful. Caird (191) points out that this view, at least in the form presented by Lohmeyer, requires us to understand “body” as the universe (which is contrary to Pauline usage) and “fullness of deity” as lordship over that universe—but “fullness of deity” must mean more than this.

(ii) puts too much weight on a single adverb, however attractive the view might be otherwise (Moule, 93, and Caird, 191; after a careful assessment Best, *Body*, 120, concludes that the Body of Christ metaphor is not in view here). Even its presentation by Benoit (*RB* 63 [1956] 5–44) and subsequent development at the hands of Burger (*Schöpfung*, 89), who understands it as an abbreviated expression connoting “the new creation,” is open to the same criticism (cf. Ernst, *Pleroma*, 101, 102).

(iv) Moule claims is improbable if intelligible.

This leaves us with (iii) and (v). The former is strongly advocated by Caird who understands it, not of Paul combating some sort of docetic Christology such as was later associated with Gnosticism but, “in the light of v 17, where σῶμα (‘body’) is used to denote the solid reality of the new age in contrast with the shadow anticipations of it in the legal systems of the age that is past” (192). Jervell’s arguments (*Imago*,

223, 224, followed by Lohse, 100) are essentially the same. View (v) which had the strong support of Lightfoot (180; note Moule's treatment, 93, 94) runs into some difficulty with the present tense κατοικεῖ ("dwells"; one might have expected a perfect, though Moule 93, raises the possibility as to whether the present is being used here as a Greek perfect tense, representing the continuance in the present of some state begun previously). Bruce, 232, comments that the adverb σωματικῶς refers not to the incarnation as such, but to Christ's complete embodiment of the πλήρωμα.

A final decision between (iii) and (v) is difficult. Lohse, 100, 101, is no doubt right when he claims that the author chose the word "bodily" in order to relate his statements to the term "body" (σῶμα). But which "body"? That referred to in chapter 2:17, the "body" as opposed to the "shadow," or the incarnate "body," cf. chapter 1:22, for example? On the whole we are inclined to the last view (v) and understand the statement as meaning that the fullness of deity dwells in Christ "in bodily form."

10. καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι. Paul's thought continues in a statement that is correlative with verse 9: from the fullness of deity that dwells in the exalted Christ follows the infilling of the Colossian Christians. There is clearly a play on the word "fullness" here (v 9 πλήρωμα, v 10 πεπληρωμένοι), though the tense of the verb (a perfect) points to a continuing state as the result of some prior action, and the passive voice suggests the readers have been filled by God. The language and word order again draw attention to the motif of incorporation—it is in union with Christ alone that they possess this fullness already.

The apostle does not define the content with which these believers are filled; there are no accompanying nouns (in the genitive or accusative cases) as might normally be expected. To suggest that the reference is to the "fullness of deity" is unlikely on grammatical grounds apart from asserting too much. Elsewhere Paul often employs this language of fullness to describe godly qualities or graces that he either desires or prays for with reference to believers (Rom 15:13, "joy and peace"; Phil 1:11, "the fruit of righteousness"; 4:19, "every need"; and in Colossians itself, 1:9, "the knowledge of his will"; cf. Eph 3:19, where the prayer is that the readers may be filled "in the direction of [εἰς] all the fullness of God"); or in some sense he is convinced they already possess (Rom 15:14, "knowledge"). Here, unless we insert some comprehensive expression such as "you have come to fullness of life in him" (RSV; Martin, NCB, 80, 81; cf. Caird, 192), and assume the Colossians are so filled, it is better to understand Paul as meaning "you are filled in him" (Burger, *Schöpfung*, 90, prefers "you are infilled in him"). As such he is affirming the presence of salvation among them. Perhaps as Dibelius-Greeven, 29, have suggested, Paul is employing a slogan the false teachers were adopting when they spoke of "fullness of life" to their followers, and asserting by way of contrast that it is only in Christ that the Colossians have been filled. This could explain the use of the unusual expression.

It has already been made plain that the Colossian Christians are to conduct their lives in the light of God's gracious work in their midst (1:9–14; cf. 2:6, 7). The possession of all things in Christ in no way absolved them from the need for continual growth (an error into which some of the Corinthians had fallen: note the biting irony of 1 Cor 4:8, "Already you are filled! Already you have become rich!" Cf Phil 3:12–14). However, there was little danger that the Colossians would misunderstand Paul's realized eschatology in this way (cf. Caird, 192; Schweizer, 109). Theirs was the opposite temptation of thinking that "fullness" was beyond their grasp unless they took sufficient account of the spiritual powers and followed a strict discipline of ritual and ascetic observance.

ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας. The readers need not pay their respects to the principalities and powers. For the one in whom they are complete is Lord and Master of such beings. While in apocalyptic thought the final overthrow of evil forces was not expected until the end of the present age (cf. Rev 19:11–16) here the present rule of Christ is emphasized. These words hark back to the language of the hymn where Christ is said to be creator of all powers and authorities (1:16) as well as their sustainer (1:17). He is "head" over the principalities and powers for God has divested them of all authority

in him (2:15). Although they continue to exist, inimical to man and his interests (cf. Rom 8:38, 39) their final defeat is inevitable (cf. 1 Cor 15:24–28).

By directing his attention to the present rule of Christ (ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ; the textual variant ὃ ἐστιν is probably due to assimilation to what was a common expression, 1:24, 3:14; certainly the relative clause refers to Christ, not the “fullness”; cf. BDF para. 132[2], Lohse, 101, and Schweizer, 109) Paul may well have been asserting an emphasis that was needed at Colossae, for as has been suggested it is possible that the spirit-powers (perhaps even angelic beings) were adopted by the false teachers as mediators, so giving to inferior members an allegiance due only to the head.

When calling Christ the “head” (κεφαλὴ) over all rule and authority Paul stops short of designating the cosmic powers a “body” (σῶμα) organically united under Christ’s rule (against Dibelius-Greeven, 29, and Lohmeyer, 107). Nowhere in Pauline teaching is the cosmos called Christ’s body; rather the church is so described (1:18, 24) and through it alone is the cosmos to be brought into unity with him (Eph. 1:10; 3:10).

11. Paul continues the theme of incorporation in Christ. He has already mentioned, by means of a perfect tense (v 10, ἐστὲ ... πεπληρωμένοι), that the believers have been filled in him (ἐν αὐτῷ). He now elaborates on this describing their participation in Christ’s death, burial and resurrection with a series of aorist tenses: “in whom you were circumcised” (περιετμήθητε, v 11), “you were buried with him” (συνταφέντες, v 12), “in him you were raised with him” (συνηγέρθητε, v 12), and “he made you alive with him” (συνεζωοποίησεν, v 13).

ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ. (On ἐν ᾧ καὶ see v 12). While the death, burial and resurrection themes are commonly related to the motif of union with Christ in Paul’s letters (Rom 6:3–6; 7:1–6; 8:17; 2 Cor 1:3–9; 4:7–14; 5:14–17; 7:3; 13:4; Gal 2:19, 20; 6:14, 15; Eph 2:5, 6; Phil 3:9–11; Col 2:20; 3:1–4, 9, 10; 1 Thess 4:14; 5:10; cf. especially Tannehill’s treatment, *Dying*) the sudden introduction of circumcision in this context is unusual. Several have claimed that its presence here can only be accounted for because of its being advocated by the false teachers (cf. Lightfoot, Williams, Beasley-Murray, Caird, etc). Paul’s choice of language here would be particularly apt if circumcision was one feature of that syncretism being inculcated upon the congregation (Bruce, 234, 235). If so, we might have expected, as in Galatians, some direct condemnation of the practice, but in verses 16–23 there is no reference to it. Schweizer (110, 111; cf. *Jews, Greeks and Christians*, 250) claims that the references to circumcision and uncircumcision in verses 11 and 13 have been “spiritualized” and are not directed polemically against any particular practice of the false teachers. Lohse (102), on the other hand, suggests that circumcision at Colossae was not considered to be a sign of the covenant that required obedience to the OT law. Rather, it was understood as a sacramental rite by which a person entered the community and gained salvation. But there is no contemporary evidence for this and we cannot say with certainty why Paul introduced the circumcision motif at this point (cf. Halter, *Taufe*, 609).

The verb περιτέμνω meaning to “cut (off) around” (BAG, 652) occurred frequently in the LXX as a ritual technical term to denote physical circumcision, an outward sign of the covenant between Yahweh and his people (cf. Gen 17:10–14, 23–27; Exod 4:25; 12:44, 48; Lev 12:3, etc). Within the OT the term came to be used in a transferred and ethical sense pointing to the “circumcision of the heart” (cf. Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; Ezek 44:7) in which Israel was to give evidence of its true circumcision by complete obedience to the commandments of the Lord, the covenant God. The OT did not suggest, however, that this spiritual circumcision was to replace or be a substitute for physical circumcision. 1QS 5:5, “[Each man] shall circumcise in the community the foreskin of evil inclination and of stiffness of neck that they may lay a foundation of truth for Israel, for the community of the everlasting covenant” (Vermes’ translation), shows that in the NT period a figurative and spiritualized view of circumcision was not unknown within the framework of Palestinian Judaism (Meyer, *TDNT* 6, 79). Here true circumcision was understood eschatologically (cf. Schweizer, 110), since it served as the basis for the everlasting covenant.

The apostle speaks of the Colossians being circumcised “with a circumcision not made with hands” (περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ; by characterizing their circumcision in this way it is immediately distinguished from what is elsewhere meant by circumcision, cf. Meyer, 363). The adjective χειροποιήτος (“made with hands”) was employed in the LXX to denote idols (Lev 26:1; Isa 2:18; at 16:12 it is applied to an idol’s sanctuary), false gods (Isa 11:9) or images (Lev 26:30); it therefore described the gods as made with men’s hands and which stood over against the living God. In all of its NT occurrences χειροποιήτος (“made with hands”) is used to set forth the contrast between what is constructed by man and the work of God (Lohse, *TDNT* 9, 436; cf. Mark 14:58; Acts 7:48; 17:24; Eph 2:11; Heb 9:11, 24). To speak of something “not made with hands” (ἀχειροποιήτος) is to assert that God himself has created it: so the heavenly house to which Paul refers (2 Cor 5:1), that will be given to each one of us at death, is “not made with hands,” that is, it is wholly a divine creation; similarly the temple that Jesus said he would erect within three days is “not made with hands” (Mark 14:58). When Paul at Colossians 2:11 speaks of a circumcision “not made with hands” (ἀχειροποιήτος) he sets in antithesis Jewish circumcision (which was done by the hand of man) with the work of God which the readers had experienced. God himself had decisively effected the change from the old life to the new (a point that is further underscored by the passive verbs used in the paragraph to signify the divine activity: περιετιμήθητε, συνταφέντες, συνηγέρθητε; cf. συνεζωοποίησεν, the subject of which is God), a theme which the apostle emphatically struck at chapter 1:21, 22. The precise nature of this circumcision can only be suggested in the light of the following phrases, particularly the parallel reference to the “circumcision of Christ.” By way of anticipation we understand this latter phrase as a reference to Christ’s death, and the words “you were circumcised” to mean “you died,” that is, in his death.

ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός. This is a key phrase in the argument of verses 11 and 12 and the meaning given to it determines the answers to several other questions raised by the passage. On the whole scholars have ranged themselves in adherence to two main lines of interpretation:

(1) The first view understands the phrase in the light of the Pauline teaching on the “flesh” (σάρξ) to mean “putting off the old nature” (cf. Col 3:9). Accordingly, “body of flesh” is equivalent to “the body of this death” (τὸ σῶμα τοῦ θανάτου τούτου, Rom 7:24) or “the body of sin” (τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας, Rom 6:6). The imagery is said to relate to baptism (cf. Gal 3:27, for an example of similar symbolism, namely, of baptism and putting on Christ) so that the stripping off of the old nature, which is said to occur in baptism, is then described as a spiritual counterpart of circumcision. It is further argued that such a use of τῆς σαρκός, which is virtually equivalent to the adjective “sensual,” is paralleled in the same chapter, verse 18, “by his sensual mind” (νοῦς τῆς σαρκός). Exponents of this view concede that the almost identical expression, “in the body of his flesh” (ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκός αὐτοῦ, 1:22), which points to Christ’s physical body, has a different meaning from the reference here, the significant omission being the word “his” (αὐτοῦ) (Lähnemann, *Kolossarbrief*, 121, 122, and Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene*, 144, 145, do endeavor to relate the two references while insisting on their basic difference of meaning). According to this interpretation (which normally understands the following phrase “the circumcision of Christ” as meaning “the circumcision which Christ gave,” that is, Christian circumcision which is baptism, see below) Paul is saying that Christians do not need to submit to circumcision, for baptism has now replaced it. (With some variations see the comments of Lohse, 103, Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene*, 144, 145, Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 68, and Caird, 192–94.)

(2) The second approach takes the phrase “in putting off the body of flesh” as a reference to the death of Christ (so Moule, 95, 96, Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 152, 153, cf. *RevExp* 70 [1973] 474, 475, and Gundry, *Sōma*, 40–42), thereby squaring with the earlier mention of his death at chapter 1:22, “the body of his flesh” (ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκός αὐτοῦ). This interpretation has the added advantage of providing a plausible explanation of verse 15, namely that in Christ’s death God divested (ἀπεκδυσάμενος, the cognate verb to the rare ἀπέκδυσις) the principalities and powers, leading them in his triumphal procession. Assuming the two phrases, “in the stripping away of the body of flesh” and “in the

circumcision of Christ,” are construed alike (by regarding the two genitives as objective), then the meaning is that the body of flesh was tripped off when Christ was circumcised, that is, when he died; the whole statement is “a gruesome figure for death” (Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 152). Here is a circumcision which entailed not the stripping off of a small portion of flesh but the violent removal of the whole body in death.

But several objections have been leveled against this approach: first, the absence of any noun or pronoun such as “his” (αὐτοῦ) means that the expression “the body of flesh” belongs to the subject of the clause, i.e. believers who have been circumcised (περιετμήθητε). It is argued that the phrase is different in meaning from the earlier reference “in the body of *his* flesh,” (1:22). But the omission (which Lohse, 103, and Caird, 193, consider to be serious) may have occurred because “the identification of the baptized with Christ is regarded as so close as to render a specifying pronoun out of place,” Moule, 95, or because the words “of Christ” in the following phrase made clear whose body of flesh is stripped off in circumcision (so Gundry, *Sōma*, 41).

Second, the idea of stripping off the physical body at death is said to smack of dualism and contradict Paul’s theology of resurrection (Caird, 193). However, it is possible that the term ἀπέκδυσις (“putting off”), perhaps even a Pauline coinage, was chosen by him to underscore the point that Christ’s death was a violent and gruesome one, and to say no more than this. This language is clearly metaphorical, like the statements about being clothed and unclothed at death to which Caird refers (2 Cor 5) in his criticisms of this view. On the whole we prefer the second alternative and understand the phrase as pointing to Christ’s violent death.

ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ. In our view, then, the “circumcision of Christ” is not his circumcision as a Jewish infant of eight days old (Luke 2:21); nor is it the “circumcision which belongs to Christ,” understood as a Christian circumcision in tacit contrast to the circumcision which belongs to Moses and the patriarchs, and therefore a periphrasis for baptism (though many exegetes take it this way). It is better to regard the statement as denoting the circumcision that Christ underwent, that is, his crucifixion, of which his literal circumcision was at best a token by way of anticipation (cf. Bruce, 234). By interpreting the phrase in this way as denoting Christ’s death and not as a synonym for baptism, verse 11 is then seen to provide a consistent application of the symbolism of circumcision, and it is not until the clause “buried with him in baptism” (v 12) is reached that the baptismal language actually begins (cf. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 153).

The primary elements of the apostolic gospel were: “Christ died for our sins ... he was buried ... he was raised ...” (1 Cor 15:3, 4). These same elements are clearly discernible in Colossians 2:11, 12 (on the above interpretation) as Paul uses first the language of circumcision (v 11), then that of baptism (v 12): Christ’s body was stripped off in his death, he was buried and he was raised. Here the believers’ participation in those saving events is also asserted (cf. Rom 6:3, 4): you died in his death (that is, you were circumcised in his circumcision; this language takes the place of συσταυρόω, “crucify together with,” or some similar verb which would conform to the συν-verbs that follow, so Tannehill, *Dying*, 49), you were buried with him and raised with him.

Explanation (2:8–15)

After admonishing the readers to continue in the teaching they had received when they accepted “Christ Jesus the Lord” as their “tradition” and to remain immovable in their faith (vv 6 and 7), Paul confronts the community with the first of several warnings: they are to be on guard lest they be carried away from the truth into the slavery of error. The means these spiritual confidence tricksters would use to ensnare the community was their particular “philosophy” (v 8) that was seductive and misleading. It gave all the appearance of having authority, dignity and revelation on its side, but was really a tool in the hands of the principalities and powers (vv 10, 15), those demonic personal forces which sought to tyrannize over the lives of men. Worst of all it stood diametrically opposed to Christ.

Taking up language from the hymn of chapter 1:15–20 the apostle spells out why (v 9) the philosophy of the false teachers is not according to Christ. Two reasons are given: first, this Christ is the one in whom the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily. Only in him is fullness to be found. It is not to be attained by groveling before the elements of the universe or by observing their regulations. Second, the readers have *already* been “filled” in Christ, the same person in whom the fullness of Deity dwells and the One who is ruler and master over every principality and power.

Paul elaborates on the theme of the Colossians’ being filled in Christ by describing their participation in his death, burial and resurrection with a series of past tenses: you were circumcised in his circumcision, i.e. you died in his death, you were buried with him in baptism and you were raised with him in his resurrection. The apostolic message, as evidenced in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, spoke of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection; here the same elements are spelled out with reference to the Colossians’ incorporation into those salvation history events. The resurrection of the Colossians with Christ has already taken place. The suggestion of the false teachers was probably that the believers were not complete in Christ. They needed to follow a strict discipline of ritual and ascetic observance, as well as taking sufficient account of the spiritual powers if they were to proceed along the path to “fullness of life.” Against this the apostle asserts that the believers of this congregation in the Lycus valley had already been raised with Christ.

Those who had once been spiritually dead in their trespasses and sinful nature God had made alive. The Colossians had come to life with Christ who was dead and rose again. Their new life, then, was a sharing in the life which he received when he rose from the dead. God had forgiven them as Gentiles, along with Paul and other Jewish Christians, all their trespasses. Indeed, he had not only canceled the debt but also destroyed the document on which it was recorded. This he did by blotting out the bond with its damning indictment against us and nailing it to the cross when Christ died. Further, he stripped the principalities and powers, who had kept us in their grip through their possession of this document, divesting them of their dignity and might. God exposed to the universe their utter helplessness leading them in Christ in his triumphal procession. He paraded these powerless “powers and principalities” so that all the world might see the magnitude of his victory.

But these spiritual powers had not been annihilated. In that triumphal procession they were visible. They continue to exist, inimical to man and his interests (Rom 8:38, 39). Nevertheless they are powerless figures unable to harm the Christian who lives under the lordship of Christ. How foolish is it then for the Colossians to think, as the false teachers want them to, that they needed to grovel before these weak and beggarly elements as though they controlled the lines of communication between God and man.

Christ is the one whom they received as Lord. Let them continue to live in him, for he is the one in whom the entire fullness of Godhead dwells, the one in whom they have been made full, the person in whom they have been incorporated in death, burial and resurrection. It is in him that they have been raised and given new life. What really matters then is Christ and Christ alone.