

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Error Leads to Strange Hybrids

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God. (Colossians 2:16–19)

Leading up to these verses, Paul has focused primarily on errors that indicate a Gnostic influence in the Colossian Church. Following these verses, his emphasis is unmistakably on the Gnostic problem. Yet in these verses, Paul directly confronts the legalistic Judaistic problems that we see in many of the other New Testament letters. Judaism and Gnosticism hardly blend in harmony. In fact they are more contradictory opposites than comfortable partners. How do we explain this unusual mixture of error?

What does Paul intend by his opening exhortation? "Let no man therefore judge you..." We cannot control whether other people approve or disapprove of our conduct, the common idea of judging someone else. However, when Paul puts the onus onto the Colossians, the indication is that they should avoid the practice of these things as part of their religious life. If they engaged in rigid avoidance of certain meats, or observed strict vegetarianism for that matter, others would judge, distinguish them and their religious beliefs based on this dietary observance. If they made drinking or not drinking certain beverages the primary focus of their faith, others would differentiate them based on this practice. If they strictly observed religious holy days, calendar cycles, or if they were strict Sabbath observers, these external rites would become the primary tools by which others would recognize them and their particular brand of faith. The only way the Colossians could avoid such judgments based on these superficial practices is that they should avoid the observances altogether. Paul makes this point more directly when dealing with diet and Sabbath observance to the Romans.

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. (Romans 14:17–18)

Paul avoids the whole question of external ritual, diet, and religious observance of days by directing us where our faith should go, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. He further emphasizes the point, "For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God and approved of men." After more than fifty years of studying my Bible, I am yet amazed at the consistency and harmony it displays when carefully read and studied.

Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. God enriched the form of the Bible with the most effective literary devices to communicate His truth in understandable form to His inquiring children. Here Paul indicates that dietary rules and observance of days in the Old Testament served as a shadow, a prophetic finger pointing to a richer reality in the New Testament, specifically the body of Christ. The Hebrew letter expands this idea to include both the Levitical priesthood as well as the brief priesthood of Melchisedec. Thus we have no shortage of New Testament direction in discovering the rich shades of truth that God gave to His Old Testament people. Students of the literary form of Scripture document something in excess of two hundred Old Testament passages cited by New Testament writers. When the New Testament tells us that something from the Old Testament is a prophetic indicator of the Lord Jesus Christ and His work, we may safely immerse our minds into the rich beauty of this truth. Example; read the four accounts of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, paying particular notice of the many times something occurs, followed by "...that the scripture might be fulfilled." Given the depth and richness of the New Testament's use of specific Old Testament lessons, there is no reason--and certainly no basis in reasonable Bible interpretation--to allow our sanctified imagination free reign in our study of the Old Testament. This practice leads people into claiming symbolic meaning that never appears in the New Testament.

Sometimes commentaries refer to this type of Bible interpretation as "types and shadows." Since a shadow is always created by a literal substance, the shadow will consistently reveal the outline or shape of the real thing that cast the shadow. The shadow of a tree will display the shape of the tree. Follow the shadow to its source, and you will discover the tree. In our study of Bible "shadows" we should always look for a New Testament passage that tells us that a particular Old Testament lesson is in fact intended by the Holy Spirit to be such a shadow. In other words the New Testament tells you where to find the tree that cast a particular Old Testament shadow. Our next step should be to look for similarities between the shadow and the thing that cast the shadow. If we discover little or no similarity, we should avoid claiming a shadow-reality corollary between our Old Testament lesson and a New Testament revelation of Jesus and His work. The safest--and I believe, the correct--basis for studying the Old Testament is to use the New Testament as our guide. When the New Testament identifies an Old Testament lesson as in some way pointing to the New Testament reality, by all means, embrace it and believe it. Absent any New Testament reference or explanation, avoid the temptation to impose "shadow" or prophetic meaning onto the Old Testament lesson.

... *but the body is of Christ.* Our emphasis should always be on the reality, not on the shadow. I grew up under a man's preaching that for a time lead me to believe that the Old Testament shadows were more important than the reality of those shadows in the New Testament. On one occasion I tried to make a "shadow-case" of a passage from the pulpit, and my father in the ministry kindly rebuked me, "Joe, never present a passage down on its all fours. Make it stand up and teach a clear truth." You can't crucify and shadow. A shadow didn't die for your sins. If we consistently keep our minds and hearts focused on the Lord Jesus Christ, most of the "shadows," the legitimate shadows of the Old Testament, will support and confirm our faith, but the bedrock foundation of our faith shall stand firmly on the New Testament reality. We should never fall into the trap that I stumbled over when my uncle rebuked me.

In our study of the Bible, a simple rule of interpretation will serve us well. Always go to the literal passages to understand what God wants you to know. Go to the symbolic passages for support, but not for primary affirmation. For example, how much of today's eschatological (end times) belief grows out of the habit of making Revelation a primary revelation of eschatology, rather than going to Paul's literal teachings in First

Corinthians 15, First Thessalonians 4, or Jesus' simple, easy-to-understand outline in John 5:28-29? A doctrine so central to our faith and life as the Bible's teaching regarding the final chapter of human history and the beginning of God's eternal kingdom should be simply and clearly set forth in Scripture. It should not be so complex in the Biblical explanation as to require an Einstein-like intelligence to unravel it and to make sense of it. It should be simply stated and comforting for all of God's children, not just the intellectuals in the family of God.

Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.... Paul warns of four things that the false teachers of these hybrid Judaistic-Gnostic mystical ideas were apparently using to deceive, beguile, and thereby to control the Colossian Christians.

1. A superficial and likely insincere appearance of humility. "Voluntary humility" suggests that these people were not nearly as humble as they appeared to be. Their apparent humility was a calculated display to make them appear to be self-effacing servants, when in fact they were calculating deceivers.
2. Angel worship. Whether we interpret this practice as the actual worship of angels or the more common habit of thinking we must approach God through various intermediaries such as angels, dead saints, or Mary, Paul rejects the notion either way. God forbids our worship of any other beings, even of His own angels. He also reminds us that the only effective and acceptable intermediary between Him and us is His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Timothy 2:5)
3. ...intruding into things which he hath not seen.... Apparently these false teachers claimed to know far more than they actually knew. They built much of their beguiling on an empty pretense of deeper knowledge than they in fact possessed. Several years ago I had an interesting, but quite alarming discussion with a man about some unusual ideas he was promoting. When I asked him to explain the basis on which he knew this new doctrine, the authority for which he tried to defend it, he claimed his ideas were grounded in and therefore defensible by the "secret will of God." My first thought was predictable. If God in fact operates on both a revealed will, and as well on a "secret will" whose principles contradict

His revealed will, how did this man come to know so much about that "secret will"? No one with any credible knowledge of the Bible claims to know all about God's will. But to claim that God is a schizophrenic being with two contradictory wills violates every tenet of Biblical teaching regarding the character of God. If this were the case, you could never know what to expect from God. Sometimes He might operate on His "revealed will," what we read about Him in Scripture, and at other times He might operate on His "secret will," a will that freely may contradict the teachings of Scripture. At one time He might prohibit murder, and at another time He might cause Hitler to cause the murder of thousands of Jews. Such an idea is as blasphemous as the teachings of these mystical-Gnostic teachers whom Paul confronts in the Colossian letter.

4. ... *vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind...*
The first three items on this list predict the fourth. Common to those who drink at the poisoned well of mystical or Gnostic error, as well as most other errors, is an arrogance that defies Biblical approval. Quite commonly, those who appear to be drunk with the poisoned waters from this well will merely defend their errant notions with a "God revealed this to me." I thought God revealed His truth to us today in Scripture; that Scripture is to be the honored and final judge of truth and error. Among other essential truths, Habakkuk 2:4 reminds us that the lifted up soul is not necessarily the upright soul.

And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God. God gives His beloved children a far better way to think and to live than we observe in any false system of belief and practice. Whenever someone embraces error: be it the mystical Gnostic hybrid that Paul rejects in the Colossian letter, or be it any other departure from the clear teachings of Scripture, rest assured. The promoter of error has forgotten who the Head of the church is and who is always to receive the preeminence in the church. He has forgotten the Supplier and Nourisher of His body in every part. He has lost sight of the glorious harmony with which God presents His truth, and the resultant harmony of God-fearing and God-worshipping people who believe and follow that truth.

With every day and with every new idea that approaches us along the path of life, we face

grave choices. Will we allow our hearts to be beguiled by the deceitful ideas of those who constantly seek to promote themselves and their mystical, non-Biblical ideas? Or will we hold the steady course of faith in the God of the Bible and the truths that He reveals clearly in that Bible for all of His children to read, to believe, and to build their lives on? "...as for me and my house...." (Joshua 24:15)

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor