

SHADOW VERSUS SUBSTANCE – A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS 2:16-23 (Part 2 of 5)

From Colossians 2:8, it is apparent that the false teaching which threatened the Colossian church had its source in pagan philosophy, which dominated that region of the world, as a result of the influence of Greek culture. It did not have its source in God but in the worldly wisdom of men who did not know God. Paul understood this distinction and the danger of it being blurred and intermixed with Biblical truth, as he indicates in Colossians 2:3-4. But as he continues to issue his warning, it becomes clear that this “Colossian Heresy” also included an element of Judaism.

The great controversy within the early church consisted of a dispute as to whether or not Gentiles should be circumcised (Acts 15:1); prompted by certain Jews from the Jerusalem church who came to Antioch, insisting upon this ceremonial rite as a requirement for salvation. The resolution occurs at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:2-29), with the purity and simplicity of the gospel being preserved from this legalistic intrusion. But the issue of circumcision continued to linger throughout the early church, as evidenced by Paul’s reference to it in Colossians 2:11 –

“. . . and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. . .”

This unique expression, “the circumcision of Christ,” occurs only here in the New Testament. Probably our best understanding of what Paul meant by it can be derived from his reference to a “circumcision of the heart” in Romans 2:29 –

“But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter, and his praise is not from men, but from God.”

This harmonizes well with God’s promise of a new and better covenant, initially revealed in a passage such as Jeremiah 31:31-34, and confirmed in Ezekiel 36:26-27, where God promises a new heart and a new spirit for His people by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit. So that when Paul refers to the “circumcision of Christ,” in Colossians 2:11, he is, in effect, rendering the Old Testament ceremonial rite of physical circumcision as no longer relevant for the New Covenant Christian. Instead, upon conversion, we undergo a circumcision of the heart by means of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. It provides us with a new nature, and in conjunction with the Spirit’s indwelling presence, we enter into a superior level of spiritual existence which was not experienced by the majority of believers, under the older and lesser covenant. This is why the apostle affirms to the Colossians, and all of us: “in Him you have been made complete” (2:10). There is no need to seek for something more in human philosophy or to revert back to something less in Old Testament Judaism. It’s as if he is posing the following question:

Why chase after those “shadows” when we have all the substance that we need in Christ?