

# Are You Following the Weak and Beggarly Elements, Rudiments, and Principles of this World?

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Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world.... But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?

Galatians 4:3, 9

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.... Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?

Colossians 2:8, 20-22

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.

Hebrews 5:12

Going to Scripture, we see that the word translated "elements" in Galatians 4, "rudiments" in Colossians 2, and "principles" in Hebrews 12 is *stoicheion*. The word *stoicheion* comes from *stoicheō*, which means to march in orderly ranks. *Stoicheion* means first, elementary things. It was used for the letters of the alphabet. Thus, translating *stoicheion* as "ABCs" works pretty well in the Galatians, Colossians, and Hebrews verses quoted above.

For example, Galatians 4:3 would read, "Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the ABCs of the world." Hebrews 5:12 would be, "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first ABCs of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat." This translation rightly brings out the fact that *stoicheion* are for the immature, they are the milk of babes instead of the meat of adults; they are the ABCs of little children instead of the literature of adults.

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We now need to find out from Scripture what these ABCs are. Looking at context, we see that the Galatians Scriptures follow Paul's teaching in Galatians 3 that "the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster" (Galatians 3:24-25). As I explain in my article, "Should we preach the law to bring people to Christ?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/preachlawqa.htm>), the King James Version is somewhat misleading in its translation here. As I say in that article, *paidagōgos*, the word translated in the King James Version as schoolmaster, "refers to a slave who was assigned to a boy from about the age of six to sixteen. His job was to make sure the boy obeyed his parents' rules. He was an overseer or guardian to make sure the child obeyed until the child came of age. The child was then free of the guardian." Another error in the King James Version is seen in the words "to bring us." They are not in the Greek. *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* by Kenneth S. Wuest translates verses Galatians 3:22-25 this way:

But the scripture shut up all under sin in order that the promise on the ground of faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before the aforementioned faith came, under law we were constantly being guarded, being shut up with a view to the faith about to be revealed. So that the law became our guardian until Christ, in order that on the grounds of faith we might be justified; but this faith having come, no longer are we under the guardian.

In Galatians 3:26-29, Paul then explains that, being no longer under the guardianship of the law, we are sons (*huiōi*—this word is definitely sons and not just children, and this is important because sons inherit) of God through faith or belief in Christ Jesus, and we have put on Christ. This removes the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Being Christ's, we are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

Paul continues this thought in chapter 4. He says that the heir, while he is a child, does not differ from a slave (*doulou*). He is under tutors (*epitropous*—this word refers to those who can give or deny permission, thus guardians or managers) and governors (*oikonomous*—better translated as stewards) until the set time of the father. Even so, we when we were children were in slavery (*dedoulōmenoi*—a form of the word "slave" in verse 1) under the elements (the ABCs, so to speak) of the world. But when the fullness of the time (that is, the

time appointed by the father) came, God sent forth his Son born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem them that were under the law that we might receive the sonship. In the King James Version, the last word is translated "adoption of sons." This is a poor translation. The word is *huihothesian*. It means placing as a son, or sonship, and it is *not* adoption. It means to take someone who is already a son by birth and, when he crosses from being a minor to his majority, to formally place him as the son and heir. Such a son is no longer under guardians, managers, stewards, and the elementary principles. He is beyond the ABCs and is expected to understand how to run the household and act maturely.

So, I hope, you see Paul's big picture. In Galatians 4:9, he expresses his dismay that those who are in Christ, and, therefore, have been placed as sons and should be mature, have turned back to ABCs which enslave them. It would be as if a professor of classics one day walked into his classroom, sat down as a student at a desk, and began repeatedly singing,

a-b-c-d-e-f-g  
h-i-j-k-lmnop  
q-r-s  
t-u-v  
w-x  
y and z  
Now I know my "ABCs",  
Next time won't you sing with me?

We would think he had lost his mind. A child is enslaved to learning his ABCs. But someone who is mature is no longer enslaved to such elementary principles. He can read and understand literature. To turn back to ABCs and think of them as the sum of one's education and goal of one's life is insane. But this is what a minister is doing when he gets in front of his congregation each week and recites the Ten Commandments. Both he and the people he is speaking to are supposed to be mature people who are in Christ Jesus and have been placed as sons over the household. But it is as if he is singing the ABCs to them. Whether it is the Old Testament laws, or pagan laws, or superstitions, or any other such rules or ordinances, when we became Christians, we graduated from these strengthless, beggarly elements of this world. And, as Hebrews 5:12 and continuing into chapter 6 explain, even the basic principles of Christian doctrine can be called *stoicheion*. These things are very basic, a Christian should get to know them quickly by studying Scripture, and then move on to strong meat.

I am afraid that today, most Christians are like the Galatians and Colossians, stuck in Old Testament commandments and ordinances and traditions of men, or they are like the Hebrews, constantly reviewing the basics of the Gospel and never getting beyond them.

By the way, *stoicheion* is also found in 2 Peter 3:10 and 12. Peter's use may simply be referring to the physical elements that make up the earth. There are, however, those who say that, even in these verses, the word is a reference to elementary principles that held people in bondage.

In summary, then, the meaning of *stoicheion* is elementary principles, such as laws, commandments, ordinances, and traditions. As such, they include the Old Testament laws, even the Ten Commandments.

Someone might object that Paul calls the law "holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Romans 7:12). But Paul also says that we "are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another" (Romans 7:4). He also says, "But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter" (Romans 7:6). That which is holy and just and good has lost its strength and become weak and beggarly for we Christians who are dead to it and it dead to us. Now that we are dead to the law and alive to Christ, no longer under the law but under grace (Romans 6:14), trying to live by Old Testament laws is only a hindrance to our walk as Christians. In fact, as Paul said in Galatians 4, turning back to the weak and beggarly elements puts into bondage. But Paul says in Galatians 5:1, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh,  
God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin,  
condemned sin in the flesh.

Romans 8:3