

Christ determines my philosophy of everything

Colossians 2:8

Paul continued the military imagery with this warning: **“Beware lest any man carry you off as a captive”** (as spoils of war). False teachers did not go out and win the lost, no more than the cultists do today. They “kidnapped” shallow converts from churches! Most of the people I have talked with who are members of anti-Christian cults were at one time associated with a Christian church of one denomination or another.

How is it possible for false teachers to capture people? The answer is simple: These **“captives”** are not familiar with the truths of the Word of God. They are vulnerable and can easily become fascinated by the philosophy and empty delusion of the false teachers. (Last week on the urgency; *present every man complete/mature.*)

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming (**Eph 4:13-14**).

“Beware (literally, ‘Look’ well) lest there *shall be* (as I fear there is) any man (who is a known emissary of heresy) *leading you away as his captive and spoil* (not merely spoiling you, but making *yourselves* his spoil) through (by means of) his philosophy.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ (**Gal 1:6-7**)

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears (**Acts 20:28-31**).

The apostle condemns “*the philosophy*” (so *Greek*) of the Judaic-oriental heretics at Colossae, which afterwards was developed into Gnosticism. This philosophy is vain and deceitful; it sets up the wisdom of man in competition with the wisdom of God, and while it pleases men’s fancies, it ruins their faith. It posits nice and curious speculations

about things above us, but has only an empty and often a cheating appearance of knowledge. You, who have in Christ “the *riches* of *full* assurance” and “the *treasures* of wisdom,” should not allow yourselves to be led away as a *spoil* by *empty*, deceitful philosophy (Col 2:2-3, 9).

After—“according to,” the **tradition of men**—opposed to, “the fulness of *the Godhead*” in your Savior. The deceivers were especially the Jewish teachers, who endeavored to keep up the law of Moses in conjunction with the gospel of Christ, but really in contradiction to it. (Now in the verses which follow v. 8, the apostle shows, that we have in Christ the substance of all the shadows of the ceremonial law.)ⁱ

This philosophy of the false teachers is “**hollow and deceptive**” (Col. 2:8, NIV) for several reasons. To begin with, it is the tradition of men and not the truth of God’s Word. The word *tradition* means “**that which is handed down;**” and there is a true Christian tradition (2 Thess 2:15; 3:6). The important thing about any teaching is its origin: Did it come from God or from man? The religious leaders in our Lord’s day had their traditions, and were very zealous to obey them and protect them (Mt 15:1–20). Even the Apostle Paul, before he met the Lord, was “exceedingly zealous of the traditions” (Gal 1:14).

The particular man-made traditions afflicting Colossae were “hollow” (*kenēs*, “empty”). The false teachers boasted of a higher wisdom in theory, transmitted by tradition among the initiated; but in practice they enjoined asceticism, ***as though matter and the body were the sources of evil***. Phrygia, a region in Asia Minor (in which was Colossae) had a propensity for the mystical and magical, which appeared in their worship of Cybele (mother of the Phrygian gods, primal nature goddess with a eunuch mendicant priesthood, worshipped with orgiastic rites) and subsequent Montanism (2nd C. heretical prophetic movement) (note two expressions of Gnosticism, ascetic and licentious).

These false teachings were according to the rudiments of the world—(See on Gal 4:3). “The rudiments” or elementary lessons “of the (outward) world,” such as legal ordinances; our Judaic childhood’s lessons—the rituals and ceremonies of human religion (Col 2:16, 20). The false teachers’ traditions were “hollow and deceptive” for another reason: they involved “the rudiments of the world.” The Greek word translated “rudiments” basically means “one of a row or series.” It had several meanings attached to it: (1) the elementary sounds or letters, the ABCs; (2) the basic elements of the universe, as in 2 Peter 3:10–12; (3) the basic elements of knowledge, the ABCs of some system, as in Hebrews 5:12. But in ancient Greece, this word also meant “the elemental

spirits of the universe, the angels that influenced the heavenly bodies.” It was one of the words in the vocabulary of the religious astrology of that day.

The Gnostics believed that the angels and the heavenly bodies influenced people’s lives. Paul’s warnings to the Colossians about “new moon” and other religious practices determined by the calendar (**Col 2:16**) may be related to this gnostic teaching, though the Jewish people also watched the calendar (**Gal 4:10**). One thing is certain: such teachings about demons and angels were not a part of true Christian doctrine. If anything, such teachings were satanic. Everything that man puts his trust in other than Christ (see list in **Col 2:16-23**).

The fact that this teaching is not after Christ is sufficient to warn us against horoscopes, astral charts, Ouija boards, and other spiritualist practices. The whole zodiac system is contrary to the teaching of the Word of God. The Christian who dabbles in mysticism and the occult is only asking for trouble.

True Christian philosophy “take[s] captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Philosophy is the love of wisdom, but if one loves wisdom that is not Christ (the Sum of all wisdom, **Col 2:3**), he loves an empty idol. Such a one will be “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (**2 Tim 3:7**).ⁱⁱ

Why follow empty philosophy when we have all fullness in Christ? This is like turning away from the satisfying river to drink at the dirty cisterns of the world (**Jer 2:13**). Of course, the false teachers in Colossae did not ask the believers to forsake Christ. They asked them to make Christ a *part* of the new system. But this would only remove Him from His rightful place of preeminence.

So Paul gave the true and lasting antidote to all false teaching: “All fullness is in Christ, and you have been made full in Him. *Why, then, would you need anything else?*” (see **Col 2:9–10**).ⁱⁱⁱ

Rather than according to Christ—“Their” boasted higher “philosophy” is but human tradition, and a cleaving to the carnal and worldly, and not to Christ. Though acknowledging Christ nominally, in spirit they by their doctrine deny Him.^{iv}

Suddenly all the old categories men used to define themselves, and the old ways they attempted to understand the world and their relationship to the divine, were shattered. The new had come. Commenting on **Colossians 3:11**, Ralph Martin (in *Colossians: The Church’s Lord and the Christian’s Liberty* [Zondervan]) observes:

In the society of Christians a new type of humanity is being formed. Christ’s life flows out to His people and is reproduced in their midst. One proof of this new life was seen in the canceling of restrictions and inhibitions which made the ancient world so socially stratified and class-conscious. Paul had shown how in the church

barriers of race, social distinction, and sex were being broken down as Christians acted on their baptismal profession of initiation into the body (see caste in India).

But many in the ancient world struggled against the idea of “new.” They were attracted to the church but tried to adjust Christ to fit their old categories. They tried to define Christianity in terms of their human philosophies rather than letting Christ define them as a new humanity (**2 Cor 5:17**).

The once-important center of Colossae, the church, was being drained of power by a group of men who claimed advanced knowledge (*gnosis*) but were attempting to fit Christianity into an old and empty philosophic system: the Gnostic way.

Not until the middle of the second century did the church fathers combat a developed form of Gnosticism. Yet most scholars see the terms Paul uses in Colossians and the concerns he deals with as indicating the presence of this heresy in Colossae. These Gnostics were concerned about issues explored by people of all ages:

- What is God like and what is His relationship to the world?
- How does a human being gain access to God’s true presence?
- How does the human being find fullness of spiritual life?

Gnosticism not only posed these questions, but claimed to answer them. When a local congregation formed at Colossae, early Gnostics hurried in to redefine Christ and the Gospel in their own terms.^v

ADDENDUM:

We have seen in the Christ Hymn (1:15-20) that it is the Father's purpose that Christ have first place in everything. That controlling reality is necessary if we are to grasp our Savior's preeminence, His majesty and centrality—and if we are to grow in our knowledge of Christ. For our perception of His dignity and majesty and vastness of His Person determines the scope of His work. For by His cross and resurrection He conquered the powers of darkness, He obtained redemption for His people, and He accomplished the payment/warranty of a new cosmos.

Feeding on these glorious realities is the spiritual 'meat' necessary to grow into a mature person spiritually—for that is the controlling mandate we saw in Colossians 1:28-29—that every believer in our assembly be presented *grownup, complete, mature in Christ*. But, these transforming truths of Christ's lordship over life, death, creation, judgment will not be learned by one pass—or by brief contact. For, we are ever prone to place Christ in a wonderful religious category and keep Him there—not fully recognizing that He is Lord of the cosmos and Lord of providence and Lord of all the laws which make our universe a cosmos and not a chaos.

Therefore Paul drives home the overarching truth that all the treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge are resident in Christ. And in His divine fullness, believers are complete in Him (2 Pet 1:3). This morning, may I suggest that vital to your spiritual growth is learning to love God with your mind, your intellect. That means grasping the fact that Christ is not just sovereign over religious things, but He is Lord of all truth, wisdom and knowledge—whether, math, physics, biology, medicine or the cultural arts (painting, drama, music, etc.).

The point is, it is easy to miss the reach, the extent of that statement in the Christ Hymn: "For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—**all things have been created through Him and for Him**. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-17). All things exist for Him.

This is why we must bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. "*We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). For He is the focal point of reality, all of God's purposes are found in Him, He is carrying out the purpose of the ages: "*This was* in accordance with the eternal purpose (purpose of the ages) which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:11). All knowledge is unified in Him. This is why can't grow in your understanding of the cross until you are staggered and rocked by the knowing Who it is; having a knowledge of the dignity and vastness of the One who died upon that cross.

Growing in our knowledge of Christ—Paul scribes this element of our spiritual growth in two verses: "That their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together

in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ. Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk in Him, having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and* overflowing with gratitude. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (Col 2:2-8).

What is at stake here? Captivity takes place if/when we choose a philosophy about things in our life and our world that is not according to Christ. This is why the growing believer is consciously taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. We are determined to give Him glory and honor and obedience in every area of life and knowledge (whether the cultural arts, entertainment, math, biology, history, etc.).

Now, Christ is Lord of all wisdom and knowledge, and the greatest wisdom ever witnessed, a wisdom which towers over human wisdom is God's wisdom in the cross of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 2:7 as God's secret wisdom (NIV). So how did a believing sinner like you and me come to comprehend this wisdom in a mystery of God? Was it by careful investigation, by finally inclining our stubborn wills? No, not according to 1 Corinthians. Listen to the passage: This wisdom in the cross this, “hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory” (v. 7) was revealed to us: “For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10).

The Spirit worked faith in us, convicted us of sin a utterly ruinous, called and quickened us, showing us the sufficiency and love of Christ in His atonement for sinners. My friends, truth is an ethical/moral issue because no one comes to the saving knowledge of the truth—no one discovers the truth while standing in a moral and ethical wasteland in which every dead and damning philosophy is placed side by side and then someone chooses the message of a crucified and risen Savior. No saving faith is a spiritual resurrection. Faith has a moral basis attribute to the gracious working of God's Spirit. For, the natural man, the person who is unregenerate, is described by Paul thus, “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor 2:12-14).

Endnotes:

- ⁱ Henry, M. (1994). [*Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume*](#) (pp. 2332–2333). Peabody: Hendrickson.
- ⁱⁱ Geisler, N. L. (1985). [*Colossians*](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 677). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 125–126). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ^{iv} McNaughton, I. S. (2006). [*Opening up Colossians and Philemon*](#) (p. 42). Leominster: Day One Publications.
- ^v Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. (1987). [*The teacher's commentary*](#) (pp. 940–941). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.