

Series: The Letter to the Colossians

Title: “Alive in Christ, Part 2”

Text: Colossians 2:8-10

Date: August 20, 2023

Verse 8

Paul continued his discussion of practical Christian living with a warning: “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). In verse 8, Paul gave what one could call “negative advice.”¹ He knew that faithful Christian discipleship sometimes requires a focus on what one should not believe or not do. Growth in Christ requires both positive and negative instruction.

“See to It That No One”

The verb translated “see” conveyed the idea of “being on the lookout for something: knowing that there are threats and dangers lurking out there.”² The language was perhaps akin to our modern “Look Out!” Or “Beware!”³ The original language of verse 8 called for continual vigilance. In all seasons, believers are to be on guard against inferior systems of Christian doctrine.

Notice that Paul used a singular pronoun in verse 8. He said, “See to it that no one....” The apostle’s use of the singular pronoun was revealing. It seems he meant to point out a lone individual in the church at Colossae. Perhaps one polarizing personality was responsible for much of the false teaching in the church. One has remarked, “There was some outstanding leader who was doing most of the damage in leading people astray.”⁴

“Takes You Captive”

Having heard of the presence of such a person after Epaphras’ visit to Rome, Paul warned his readers. He expressed concern that they might be taken “captive.” Interestingly, the Greek word rendered “takes you captive” was one that sounded a lot like the Greek word for synagogue. Perhaps Paul intended to use a play on words. Early Christians often used Jewish synagogues for their meetings. Paul knew genuine believers were in danger of being taken captive (sulagōgéō) by Jewish legalistic teachings at the synagogue (sunagōgē).⁵

¹ Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 100.

² Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 56.

³ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 464.

⁴ Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 490.

⁵ Wright, 100.

The New Testament clearly reveals that believers possess a certain spiritual freedom in Christ (Galatians 5:1; Romans 8:2; John 8:32). The New Testament also reveals that there are often fake forms of Christian teaching that promise a false form of spiritual freedom (1 Peter 2:16-19). Such was the case at Colossae. Doctrinal deviators boasted that a heightened degree of spiritual liberty could be experienced through so-called special knowledge, supposed interaction with angels, and manmade ceremonial observations.

“Philosophy”

Paul indicated that “philosophy” was part of the problem at Colossae. The Greek word for “philosophy” was a compound word that literally meant “love” (philéō) of “wisdom” (sophía). Ancient Jewish writers used the word to refer to “teaching” or an “intellectual movement.”⁶ It is important to note that Paul did not mean to give a wholesale dismissal of the value of philosophy. The apostle was not in favor of spiritualized ignorance. Paul knew well that philosophy has its rightful place. Calvin warned, “Many have mistakenly imagined that philosophy is here condemned by Paul.”⁷ One has rightly noted, “Everyone is a philosopher whether they realize it or not.”⁸

Paul’s issue was with false philosophy. In the case of the Colossians, he was concerned with Gnostic forms of philosophy — the human-centered, Christ-less ‘knowledge’ that was being promoted by false teachers. Instead of giving a wholesale condemnation of all philosophy, Paul meant to warn against any philosophy that contradicted the person and work of Christ. Remember, the Greek word for philosophy meant “love of wisdom.” Paul surely wasn’t against a love of wisdom since the Proverbs frequently commended such a love (Proverbs 1:1-7; 2:1-8; 3:13-20; 8:1-11).

Interestingly, some believe Gnosticism had its beginning in Platonic philosophy. There may be warrant in such a suggestion, since Gnosticism made a big distinction between the spirit and flesh. It regarded human flesh as being of an inferior and inconsequential status. Plato held to similar views. Perhaps Paul had such things in mind as he warned his readers of “philosophy.”

“Empty Deceit”

Paul next referred to the false teaching in Colossae as “empty deceit.” The word rendered “deceit” was used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to inferior doctrines (2 Thessalonians 2:10; 2 Peter 1:3). It was a term used of trickery or deception in speech.⁹ Quite possibly, the Gnostics weren’t forthright with their beliefs. They used trickery in their teaching. Perhaps they used well-known Christian terms,

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 464.

⁷ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 180.

⁸ Johnston, 57.

⁹ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 62.

even talking about Jesus and the cross, while secretly holding to different meanings for such terms. They gained a following by duping honest believers into believing that they they were true Christians. To this day, such tactics often infect the church. God's children should be on guard.

“According to Human Tradition”

Paul also warned his readers about “human tradition.” The qualifier “human” was important. Not all tradition is bad (Jeremiah 6:16). Paul commended gospel traditions in some of his other writings (2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:6). His concern in our current text was with the pursuit of human tradition as opposed to gospel tradition. Jesus gave warnings and rebukes concerning such things in his own teaching (Matthew 15:2-6).

The word rendered “human” in verse 8 contained the Greek word from which we get our word “anthropology.” In the context of Colossians 2:8, the word depicted traditions that were opposed to “the true, living, divine traditions” of Christ, traditions spoken of in verses 6-7.¹⁰ A.T. Robertson has rightly noted that “tradition may be good or bad.”¹¹ Paul certainly wasn't against good, Christ-centered tradition. Instead, he was concerned that spiritually harmful traditions were distracting and deceiving people at Colossae. He would later give more details concerning such traditions in 2:16-17.

For Jewish believers at Colossae, Paul's warning most likely evoked memories of the Lord's warnings to God's people in Isaiah's day: “...thus people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men...” (Isaiah 42:13). In his teaching and preaching, Jesus rebuked first-century Jewish religionists for their fixation on human tradition: “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’” (Mark 7:6-7).

Paul concurred with the rebukes of Isaiah and Jesus. At Colossae, there was a false teaching that imposed manmade, religious roles and traditions on others. Paul would later speak against such things again (Colossians 2:20-22). In doing so, he would once again point to their human origin, speaking of “human precepts and teachings” (Colossians 2:22). Believers should always be on guard against manmade traditions that deviate from the person and work of Christ.

“According to the Elemental Spirits of the World”

Paul also warned his readers about “elemental spirits of the world.” In the ancient world, many had a worldview that believed an array of unseen “gods” and angelic beings had governmental powers and control over different realms of human society. This perspective was maintained in the Gnostic heresy. Early churches were often tainted by professing Christians who taught that it was necessary to pray to various angelic beings and “gods.”

While Scripture reveals that there are indeed unseen angelic forces (2 Kings 6:17), and though it affirms that such forces seem to have some sort of authority over

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 464.

¹¹ Robertson, 490.

different realms of creation and human society (Daniel 10:13), Paul maintained that such beings were not divine (I Corinthians 8:4-6). In writing to the Colossians, he warned his readers about praying to such beings (Colossians 2:18). He didn't want them to have an erroneous faith that was built on an undue fascination with such things. Their faith needed to rest on the person and work of Christ alone.

In speaking of angelic beings in Colossians 2:8, Paul used language that spoke of a "series" or a "row."¹² His intent was to affirm the way angelic beings are organized in a system marked by varying levels of rank and authority. He also affirmed such things in Ephesians 6:12. However, Paul was quick to dismiss the Gnostic fascination with angels as heresy. He would later give more warnings concerning such things in Colossians 2:18.

"Not according to Christ"

There were many doctrinal errors at Colossae. "Philosophy," "empty deceit," "human tradition," and teachings concerning "elemental spirits" were deceiving many. While there were numerous characteristics of the false teaching at the church, each came from the same root problem — a lack of appropriate regard for Christ. Paul indicated such to be true with his final descriptor in verse 8 — "not according to Christ."

With his reference to Christ, Paul highlighted the center of all true religion — the person and work of Jesus. One has said, "...all knowledge is to be seen through the lens of Christ and him alone."¹³ Another has said, "Christ is the yardstick by which to measure philosophy an all phases of human knowledge."¹⁴ If Christ isn't central to supposed "Christian" teaching, such teaching should be avoided. God's children should be quick to discern if the preaching and teaching they hear is rooted in the persona and work of Jesus. Salvation and hope is only found in Christ.

Verse 9

Paul continued his thought concerning Christ by saying, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9). The Greek word rendered "for" at the beginning of verse 9 could have been translated "because." It served as a transition between what was said in verse 8 and verse 9. It pointed to why Paul's readers should have been on guard against false philosophy. He knew that some were reducing the nature of Jesus. The error at Colossae concerning the person of Jesus had a two-fold problem. It failed in reference to both Jesus' divinity and humanity. Paul exposed both errors in verse 9.

"The Whole Fullness of Deity Dwells"

Paul addressed Jesus' divinity by saying the whole fulness of deity dwells" in Christ. Paul implemented a word play with his use of the word "fulness." Whereas the false teacher offered "empty" teachings (verse 8), all the fulness of God was to be found in Christ. The word rendered "dwells" appeared in the present tense of the original

¹² Wright, 101.

¹³ Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 175.

¹⁴ Robertson, 491.

language. It thus depicted a continued action. The apostle's word usage revealed that the fulness of God has always rested on Jesus and it always will. Even now at the right hand of God, Jesus is fully God (Revelation 5:6-10).

It is important to note that the Greek word for "fullness" (pleroma) was likely a key term for the false teachers at Colossae. They boasted of receiving some sort of fullness through supposed secret knowledge and interactions with angelic beings. Paul contended that true fullness was to be found in Christ. Such was true because Jesus was fully God, a fact that the Colossians' heretics denied. Paul contradicted their claims by flatly saying Jesus was fully God, making an assertion similar to the one he made in Colossians 1:19.

In the face of the Gnostic heresy, Paul presented Jesus as being fully God. In his mind, Jesus was not a mere angelic intermediary who had descended from God over the course of aeons. Jesus was God himself. John affirmed such in John 1:18, saying, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." God was made known and manifested at different times in history prior to Christ's birth, but he was made fully known through Jesus (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Those who want to know God should look no further than Jesus. In Christ one finds God and all of God's truth. Those who diminish Jesus because of their devotion to human philosophies do so to their own peril. The Puritan John Flavel once said, "Poor Christian, be not dejected, because thou seest thyself out-stripped and excelled by so many in other parts of knowledge; if thou know Jesus Christ, thou knowest enough to comfort and save thy soul. Many learned philosophers are now in hell, and many illiterate Christians in heaven...O how much time is spent in other studies, in vain discourses, frivolous pamphlets, worldly enjoyments? How little in the search and study of Jesus Christ."¹⁵

Bodily

Paul not only affirmed the divine nature of Jesus in our verse He also affirmed Christ's humanity. He did so by making reference to the way the fullness of God dwelt in Christ "bodily." The Greek word for "bodily" could have been translated "in solid reality."¹⁶ Paul's intent was to depict Christ as having had a real physical body. Since the Gnostics believed that physical matter was inherently evil, they denied Christ's humanity.

Because of the incarnation, Jesus had a real, literal, physical, tangible body. He had a body like our bodies, yet his body was without sin. This was important for Paul's readers, as some false teachers claimed Jesus was clothed with a sort of humanity that was a mere appendage to his deity.¹⁷

Along with the word rendered "deity", the word "bodily" affirmed a doctrine we now call "the Hypostatic Union", a doctrine that maintains Jesus was fully God and fully man through his incarnation. Paul held up both the divinity and humanity of Christ,

¹⁵ Flavel, John. *The Works of John Flavel: Volume 1*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 33.

¹⁶ Wright, 103.

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 464.

rejecting hollow claims of heretics and extolling the true path of salvation via the fully-God and fully-man God-man.

It was required for Jesus to be both God and man in order to offer a suitable sacrifice for the sins of sinful humanity. If he had not had been a man, he could not have served as a substitute for human sin. If he had not been divine, he would not have been a suitable and sinless substitute. Jesus had to be both God and man to pay for the sins of humankind. Early in the life of the church, questions and confusion concerning these things frequently arose. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has commented:

The first three or four centuries of the Christian Era were spent very largely in the infant church fighting for this very thing! Heresies arose which denied either our Lord's humanity or His deity; or denied that He came truly in the flesh, or that He really suffered. And the fathers of the church very rightly saw that if these things were lost, the gospel would be lost, and that there would be no salvation and no gospel to preach.¹⁸

Paul clearly upheld both the humanity and deity of Christ in Colossians 2:9 because he knew both realities were essential to gospel preaching.

Verse 10

After talking about the identity of Christ in verse 9, Paul spoke of the believer's union with Christ in verse 10. He said, "...and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:10). Paul's words in verse 10 highlight the resultant experience that comes for those who are born-again. He wanted his readers to know that Christian salvation offers so much more than what was being offered by the false teachers. Gospel realities were richer than the special knowledge, ritualistic ceremonies, and angelic interaction of the false teachers. Through the person and work of Christ, believers had union with Christ.

"You Have Been Filled"

The reference to the Colossians being "filled" was undoubtedly a reference to regeneration and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that comes with Christian conversion (John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Galatians 3:2). In the original language, Paul used perfect tense and periphrastic verbiage to depict believers as having complete, full, continual, and biding union with Christ. He wanted to stress the permanent results of the Holy Spirit filling that takes place at conversion. Through regeneration, Jesus Christ is always with believers, and he will never forsake them (Matthew 28:20).

Paul spoke of similar truth in a prayer he prayed for the church at Ephesus, requesting that the Ephesians would, "... know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" and "be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19). The apostle was frequently concerned that his readers might experience the fullness that is available via union with Christ. One has commented on the meaning of Paul's words in Colossians 2:10 by saying, "God intends to flood the lives of men and women, and

¹⁸ Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 1, the Gospel of God*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 110.

ultimately the whole creation, with his own love...and...he has already begun to put this plan into effect through Christ and by his Spirit.”¹⁹ The indwelling of the Spirit, and the subsequent experience of union with Christ, provides believers with all they need for godly living. In one of his letters, Peter said, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

“Head”

The reference to Jesus as “head” is yet another reference in Colossians to the doctrine of union with Christ (Colossians 1:2; 18, 27, 5, 7). With regeneration, believers become a part of Christ’s mystical and spiritual body (1 Corinthians 12:12). As a result, they have oneness with Christ who is the head of the body (Ephesians 5:23). Through such a union, they receive all the spiritual strength and sufficiency they need for Christian living.

Paul’s reference to such things were a direct contradiction to the heresies at Colossae. The heretics in the Lycus Valley boasted of fullness they received via communion with angels (Colossians 2:18). False teachings often have a striking resemblance and similitude to true Christian truth. In their pursuit of divine things, they often prescribe similar methods but they employ different means. Such was the case at Colossae. False teachers spoke of the communion and union, but such things for them were rooted in angelic entities, not Christ.

The title “head” emphasized both Christ’s dominion over all things (Matthew 28:18) and the believer’s union with Christ (Colossians 1:2). As a result, it could be seen as emphasizing Christ’s privacy or supremacy, or it could refer to Christ’s life-giving union with his people. The context of Colossians 2:10 seems to indicate that Paul had the later idea in mind. As he did in Colossians 1:18, he wanted to portray Christ as the head of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12) who serves as “the center of vital force, the source of all energy and life” for God’s people.²⁰

“All Rule And Authority”

Paul’s reference to “all rule and authority” at the end of verse 10 was relevant to the issues at Colossae. As he did in verse 8 with his reference to “elemental spirits of the world,” Paul wanted to portray Christ as being supreme over the angelic realm. The language of verse 10 was used back in 1:16 to proclaim similar truth. In addition, Paul used it in Ephesians 1:21-23 to speak of Christ’s authority over angelic and demonic spirits. The believers in Colossae did not need to try to connect with God by praying through various strata and levels of angelic beings (Colossians 2:18). Union with Christ provided them with the spiritual life and vitality they needed.

¹⁹ Wright, 103.

²⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 464.