

“The Safeguard Against Seduction”

Colossians 2:8-10 (NRSV)

We don't have to live very long to know that **it's easy to fool people**, and that it **is also very easy to be fooled ourselves**. Yet didn't the country-bumpkin lawyer and one of the greatest and wisest of all of the presidents of the United States of America, **Abraham Lincoln**, say, “It is true that you may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can't fool all of the people all the time” (Alexander K. McLure, Lincoln's Yarns and Stories, 1904)? Hopefully even in the midst of all kinds of tomfoolery, common sense will prevail. But as another wit has aptly said, “The problem with common sense is that it isn't very common.”

This is the problem that the Colossian Christians faced. They were being **seduced by the words and ideas of certain false teachers** and they didn't seem to know to whom to turn. So Paul gave them some sage advice.

The late **Donald Grey Barnhouse**, a New England Presbyterian minister, illustrated how easy it is to be fooled is by telling of **a practical joke** which he and some of his teenaged friends used to play on some unsuspecting passersby in the large city in which he lived. He and a number of his friends would stand on a busy street corner and stare intently into the air. One of them would point upward while the other said (loudly enough to be overheard), “It isn't!” A third friend would argue, “It is so!” At this, one or two people would stop and began to look in the same direction as Barnhouse and his friends were pointing. As the argument grew more heated, others would stop to gaze fixedly at the point they believed he and his friends were discussing. Then, one by one, Barnhouse and his friends quietly slipped out of the group that had gathered, and stopped a few yards away to watch. By this time, some fifteen people were looking into the air. The crowd changed as new passersby came along and joined the group and those who had been staring the longest left, shaking their heads in befuddlement. Twenty minutes later, several people were still looking upward. Several others had gone off to the side and were leaning against a building, still looking up for something that wasn't there and never had been. How clever of Barnhouse and his friends! Dumb, but funny, of the onlookers! This all reminds me of “Candid Camera”!

About his childhood trick, Barnhouse observed:

That little incident is a good illustration of the earth-born religions. People talk about having faith; [but] they tell you to look in a direction where there is absolutely nothing. [Other] people are so desperately in need of seeing something that they will look until they are almost blind, yet they [will] never catch a glimpse of anything real (Let Me Illustrate, 1967, p. 86).

His point is so true. Over my 37 years of ministry I've seen countless numbers of Christians, who were otherwise perfectly healthy, **set their sight on and put their faith in something that was absolutely nothing!** I've heard of a Presbyterian pastor in Vancouver who told the women of his congregation that wearing hats in church was the only way to true godliness, and some of them agreed. I've seen intelligent, college-age men refuse to wear shirts or trousers made of mixed fibres because the Hebrew Scriptures forbade Israelites to wear clothing that was part wool and part linen (Deut. 22:11). I'm aware of Mormons who say we should practice certain rituals and avoid coffee, tea and alcohol, as well as Seventh Day Adventists who say the same thing, and advocate Christians to worship only on Saturdays. Yet Paul clearly says, later in Colossians, "Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink, or of observing festivals, new moons or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (2:16-17).

Sadly, **it's amazingly easy for intelligent people to rest their lives on what will ultimately prove to be nothing.** We see them standing on street corners selling their literature. We read of them following their guru to another country, giving them all they have. We hear of them attending quasi-religious pep rallies, where they are told health and wealth are theirs if they will only believe in themselves and help themselves to what is available. For example, I read just the other day in The National Post that a group of British bankers told a capacity crowd at St. Martin-in-the-Fields Anglican Church, in London England, that it was okay to be rich (Prosperity Gospel: When Christianity and Capitalism Go Together," November 14, 2009, A1). We're also aware of religious cults held together by such an enslaving sociology that it's almost impossible to escape. It's possible for seemingly healthy believers to be led astray; it happens daily!

Paul found this to be true of the Colossian church and so he issued a warning, which describes the danger, and then prescribes the safeguard against spiritual seduction. His charge is delivered in verse 8

1. A charge to resist (Col. 2:8).

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ (2:9).

Please understand **Paul was not putting down philosophy per se.** Philosophy simply means “**love of wisdom.**” Paul loved wisdom and using the mind as much as anybody else. Both Judaism and Christianity are inherently philosophical because they make reasonable, holistic claims about the nature of reality and they posit reasonable and good values to guide life.

What Paul was warning against was **a dangerous, mis-guided Gnostic philosophy** that taught a person had to work his or her way up a long ladder of thoughts and actions before he or she could reach God and ultimate good. **Their thinking combined some Jewish rites and regulations** along with **some Greek philosophies and far Eastern mysticism**, like the baseness of the body and the immortality of the spirit or the soul, to form a mishmash that appealed to those who wanted someone else to tell them what was right and wrong and what might be best for them. It also appealed to those who enjoyed being part of **a new, elite of group of people who claimed to be the only ones “in the know”** (the actual, literal meaning of the word Gnosticism). The Colossians were presented with “**something more**” that purported to elevate them from their baby-faith to the truly mature understanding of the deep, although essentially mysterious, things of God.

Paul’s warning noted four characteristics of this dangerous, seductive philosophy.

a.) First, **it was deceptive.** It sounded great, but it was “**empty deceit.**” Surely, we’ve all heard such high-falutin’ talk in academic, scientific, political and religious circles! It all sounds so learned, but it actually says nothing. And, sometimes, even though it all sounds rather inane, it is actually highly pernicious.

The **Gnostics** could talk like that (in their religious realm) and impress and intimidate those who knew no better. Yet, if Gnosticism’s basic idea was accepted, then everything became supremely rational, even the most absurd rites and mumbo-jumbo.

It's the same with **modern cults**. One of the still flourishing cults of our day, **Mormonism** has as its credo this quasi-theological couplet: "**As God was, man is. As God is, man can become.**"

Is it any surprise that this is exactly the highly believable, yet intensely human-centred, so-called "great secret" that **Dan Brown's** latest bestseller, *The Lost Symbol* (2009), purports to reveal? I've read the book; it's really no secret; it's just the same, age-old lie.

The Mormons believe that God was once a man, but because he lived a highly virtuous life, he was reincarnated to successively higher lives until, finally, he became a god of his own planet, and then the God of heaven. Today, thousands are setting out to become gods! True, there is no doubt the Mormons are highly moral people; they do a lot of good in the world. But, in spite of wishing it were so, people are not going to become gods!

The brand of Gnosticism that Paul was attacking was also **perversely rational, yet highly moral**. **F. F. Bruce**, of Manchester University, said of these Gnostic philosophers:

The spiritual confidence-tricksters against whom [the Colossians] are put on their guard did not inculcate a godless or immoral way of life; [else] the error of such teaching would have been immediately obvious. Their teaching was rather a blend of the highest elements of natural religion known to Judaism and paganism (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, 1957, p. 230).

Those trying to lead the Colossians astray weren't "bad people" with respect to conventional morals. Much like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, they may even have exceeded many of the Jews and the Christians in their lifestyles. Moreover, they were sincere. Their sophisticated language, their stringent rationality within their own system of thought, and their self-conscious morality made **an impressive, religious Venus Fly Trap**. These are the hallmarks of any cult today: they are attractive and seductive, but they also turn out to be as vacuous as a hot air balloon.

b.) Not only was their philosophy "**empty deceit**," but as far as Paul was concerned, the Gnostic philosophy came from "**human tradition**." No matter how ancient or appropriate (Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 1982, p. 110) the Gnostics might've considered their philosophy to be,

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians will always understand, with Paul, the dangers of relying on mere human tradition instead of the clear witness of Holy Scripture. Every cult today, even those which claim new revelation, hawk their deceptions as being ancient in origin, but now brought to light by historical happenstance, the superior wisdom of their own interpretation, or the position of the stars, or whatever else they can dream up....

c.) Third, this false teaching was **controlled by** what Paul called “**the elemental spirits of the universe.**” There will always be those who believe that some kind of astrological confluence influences our position and action. Paul suggests the granting of such an idea only puts people back under the same kind of bondage they experienced when they were without Christ.

Certainly, this is true of non-Christian cults, like Mormonism, in our present day. Read the history of their founder, Joseph Smith, and you will see references to ancient golden tablets, esoteric beliefs and practices, and a reliance upon relatively recent revelations, as well as occultic intervention and direction. These “elemental” and pagan “spirits” are just as active today, and their hallmark is that they are not “according to Christ.” They may use the name of “Jesus Christ,” even worship Jesus Christ; however, they do not mean the Christ who is taught in Scripture, but a Christ of their imaginations, a Christ of some other “elemental spirits.”

d.) Last, says Paul, this false Gnostic philosophy is **enslaving**. He reminded the Colossians of this when he writes at the outset, “See to it that no one **takes you captive** through philosophy and empty deceit.” The phrase “take you captive” is meant to evoke a picture of prisoners being taken away by victorious armies. Cultic teaching asserts a death-like grip on its followers, and few come out of it.

There was an excellent book referring to this, written by an ex-Jehovah’s Witness couple, Heather and Gary Botting, entitled The Orwellian World of Jehovah’s Witnesses (University of Toronto Press, 1984). Paul is saying, Stay away from false teaching if you value your life. “See to it that no one takes you captive.”

How is it possible for one not to be sucked in by a philosophy that is beguiling, subtly deceitful in its language, logically compelling within its system of reason, and enticingly moral? The only answer is “[Christ in whom] the fullness of deity dwells bodily” (2:9).

2. Reasons to resist (Col. 2:9-10).

Jesus Christ is more than merely God-like. He is more than simply overflowing with the character of God. Rather:

The essence of God, undivided and in its whole fullness, dwells in Christ in His exalted state, so that He is the essential and adequate image of God (O'Brien, p. 111).

This statement that **“in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”** forever blasts the Gnostic (and all other cults') ideas that the “fullness” comes through such things as “emanations” and angelic mediators, as well as our supposedly “good works.” We can see the fullness of God in his work in the heavens and the rest of creation all around us (Rom. 1:19-20). But in Christ we see the very face of God. In Christ we meet the mercy and the love, the compassion and the forgiveness of God. Jesus Christ is the supreme Temple of Deity in whom all the divine glories are embodied. Why would we go anywhere else but to him?

This truth is great in itself. It ought to steel us against being taken in by any deceitful, empty philosophy. Yet there is something else here, which is utterly breathtaking: **Christ, full of deity, fills us.** Paul had already stated that the mystery of faith was this: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27b). Now he adds, “... and you have come to fullness in him who is the head of every ruler and authority” (2:10).

I love the Pacific Ocean. No matter where I stand on its shore, I realize I'm but a small speck alongside a seemingly infinite expanse. As I stand there, I sometimes reflect that if I were to take a pint jar and allow the ocean to rush into it, in an instant, my jar would be filled with the fullness of the ocean. But, of course, I could never put the whole of the Pacific Ocean into my jar! Thinking of Christ, I realize that because he is infinite, he can hold all the fullness of Deity in himself. And whenever one of us finite creatures dips the tiny vessel of our life into him, we instantly become filled with the fullness of his love and peace. So too, an American writer and poet, **Joy Davidman**, later C. S. Lewis's wife, the professor who influenced her in her journey towards the Christian faith, put it this way: “Can one scoop up the sea in a teacup?” You can't. But that's how she experienced Christ's calm at a critical time in her life (These Found the Way, “The Longest Way Round,” 1950, p. 23).

From the perspective of our own spiritual health and well-being, **the capacity of our containers is of the greatest importance.** Our souls are elastic, so to speak, and there are no limits to the capacity of our hearts. There is always room for more good thoughts, for more compassion and love -- both from God, to us and flowing out from us, to others. We can always be open to hold more and more of Christ's fullness (Eph. 3:17). The walls can always stretch out further; the roof can always rise higher; the floor can always hold more. The more of his fullness we receive, the more we can accommodate.

His fullness meets our own individual needs and his fullness in us can supply the needs of others. He gives us what the moment requires: wisdom, strength, courage, endurance and love.

He is a path, if any [are] misled;
 He is a robe, if any naked be;
 If any chance to hunger, he is bread;
 If any [are] enslaved, he is free;
 If any [are] weak, how strong is he!
 To dead ones, [he is life]; to sick ones, health,
 To blind [ones], sight; and to the needy, wealth.
 (R.E.O. White, In Him the Fullness, 1973, p. 83).

Are you allowing his fullness to fill you to the brim? Are you growing in his fullness? If you are **overflowing with Christ**, the Gnostic appeals of the empty philosophies of our age will have little appeal to you. Let us covenant with God to invite more of Christ's fullness in us.

Amen

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 November 22, 2009