

## Traditions of Men

Scripture: Colossians 2

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**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. (2:8a)**

Paul is concerned that those who have been transferred from Satan's domain to Christ's kingdom not become enslaved again. He voiced a similar concern in Galatians 5:1: "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." He calls the Colossians to constant watchfulness because danger is near, as the present tense imperative form of *blepo* (**see to it**) indicates. The church constantly faces the danger of false teachers. Jesus says in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." In Matthew 16:6 he warns, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

The apostles also warned the church against false teachers. Paul cautioned the Ephesian elders 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" (Acts 20:29–31). To the Philippians he wrote, "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision" (Phil. 3:2). Peter also warns of the danger of false teachers. He writes in 2 Peter 3:1, "You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness."

Paul specifically warns them to be careful **that no one takes you captive**. **Takes you captive** is from *sulagogeo*, a rare word used only here in the New Testament and not at all found in extra-biblical Greek until long after Paul's time. *Sulagogeo* is a compound word, made up of *sule*, "booty," and *ago*, "to carry off." It literally means "to kidnap," or "to carry off as booty, or spoil of war." The same concept is found in 2 Timothy 3:6, where Paul warns of "those who enter into house-holds and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses." To Paul, it was unthinkable that those who had been ransomed and redeemed should be vulnerable by ignorance and thus in the spiritual war become prisoners of some spiritual predator with false doctrine.

Surely it grieves the heart of any pastor to learn of spiritual children who by immaturity are susceptible to the danger of false teaching and fall prey to a cult. Yet many have been duped into thinking they have found some truth, which in reality is a lie that has made them a captive to false teaching. One of the primary duties of church leaders is to guard the flock against wolves and perverse men (Acts 20:28–32) who assault flock members in an effort to kidnap them.

Paul describes the means the false teachers would use to kidnap the Colossians as **philosophy and empty deception**. *Philosophia* (**philosophy**) appears only here in the New Testament. As already noted, it means “to love wisdom.” It is used here in a much broader sense than the academic discipline, since “philosophy is not reducible to the Judeo-Gnostic speculations about which Paul warned the Colossian Christians” (Mark M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], p. 11). Historian Adolf Schlatter noted that “everything that had to do with theories about God and the world and the meaning of human life was called ‘philosophy’ at that time, not only in pagan schools, but also in the Jewish schools of the Greek cities” (*The Church in the New Testament Period* [reprint, London: SPCK, 1955], pp. 150–54).

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote, “There are three philosophical sects among the Jews. The followers of the first of whom are the Pharisees, of the second the Sadducees, and the third sect who pretends to be a severer discipline are called Essenes” (*Jewish Wars* 2.8.2). Thus, the term *philosophia* was broad enough to encompass religious sects. The use of the definite article with *philosophia* shows that Paul was referring here to the specific beliefs of the Colossian errorists. Most likely they used it to refer to the transcendent, higher knowledge they supposedly had attained through mystical experience.

Paul goes on to describe this philosophy as **empty deception**. Lightfoot wrote, “The absence of both preposition and article in the second clause shows that *kenes apates* [empty deception] describes and qualifies *philosophia*” (*St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* [1879; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959], p. 178). He translated the phrase, “Through his philosophy which is an empty deceit” (P. 178). Although the false teachers at Colossae considered their view the epitome of wisdom, Paul dismisses it as **empty deception**.

*Apates* (**deception**) means “a deceit, fraud, or trick.” The philosophy of the Colossian false teachers was not what it appeared to be. It sounded good and seduced the minds of those deceived by it, but it was a vapid illusion. There is no value in such speculative human philosophy, no matter how deeply and profoundly religious it sounds.

Commentator Herbert Carson sounds an appropriate warning:

With Paul it would no doubt be true to say that philosophy, in the simple sense of a love of knowledge and a desire for the truth, would be quite compatible with his position. But to philosophy in the developed sense with its emphasis on the primacy of human reason he would obviously be utterly opposed.... Hence, while the Christian may see a certain negative value in speculative philosophy, he will constantly be on his guard lest he come to study revelation, not as a believer, but as a humanist. This does not mean that he should come with a blind unreasoning faith. But it does mean that, instead of bringing philosophical presuppositions which will color his study of Scripture and so prejudice his interpretation, he comes as one conscious of the finiteness of his intellect, and aware that his mind also is affected by his sinful nature. Thus he is willing to be taught by the Holy Spirit, and acknowledges that it is the Word of God rather than his own reason which is the final arbiter of truth. (*The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], p. 62)

Paul then gives two sources for such vain speculation. **The tradition of men** is the first. **Tradition** is *paradosis*, that which is given from one to another. Just because people have believed something and handed it down through the years does not make it true. Tradition usually serves merely to perpetuate error.

A study of the history of philosophy serves to illustrate that point. Most philosophers have built on the work of previous philosophers, either to refine their system, or to refute it. Francis Schaeffer remarked, "One man would draw a circle and say, 'You can live within this circle.' The next man would cross it out and would draw a different circle. The next man would come along and, crossing out the previous circle, draw his own—ad infinitum" (*The God Who Is There* [Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1973], p. 17).

First-century Judaism is another example of the effects of tradition. The Jewish leaders and teachers had incrustated the Word of God with so many customs, rituals, and teachings that they were no longer able to distinguish it from the traditions of men. Mark 7 records an exchange between the scribes and Pharisees and Jesus on this subject. In verse 5, they asked Jesus, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders?" Jesus replied in verses 8–9, "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.... You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition."

The Gentiles also had traditions. Peter used the same Greek word in a different form when he wrote to Gentiles in 1 Peter 1:18: “Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited [received by tradition] from your forefathers.” In our own day, a common argument for evolution is the false assertion that it is “what scientists have always believed.” In all the above examples, tradition was nothing more than ignorance and falsehood handed down from generation to generation. It was the tradition of men, not the tradition of God (2 Thess. 3:6), which is the only source of truth.

A second source for this false philosophy is **the elementary principles of the world**. It is difficult to reconstruct the exact meaning of that phrase. *Stoicheia* (**elementary principles**) refers primarily to the letters of the alphabet. It literally means “things in a row.” Hence, Paul might be describing the false belief system of the Colossian errorists as rudimentary, too simplistic for mature spiritual adults. To accept their teaching would be to descend, to regress from the mature teaching of Scripture to the infantile teachings of an immature religion, based not on advanced thinking and wisdom but on silly and childish thoughts. To abandon biblical truth for empty philosophy is like returning to kindergarten after earning a doctorate. Paul writes:

The word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (1 Cor. 1:18–21)

This same phrase is also found in Galatians 4:3: “So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.” There again, the element of immaturity is evident. Whether first-century Judaism, as in Galatians, or the false teaching threatening the Colossians, human religion is not advanced, erudite, higher, transcendent and lofty in its profundity. Rather, it is banal, elemental, and rudimentary. It does not convey any new and profound truths. And, fatally, at its core is an effort to achieve salvation by works.

There is a second possible, though less likely, meaning for *Stoicheia*. It could refer to elemental spirits—either supposed emanations from God, or the spirit beings that the people of the ancient world associated with the stars and planets. Astrology is not new. Many of the great men of the ancient world, such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, believed in it implicitly. People who believed in astrology were caught in the grip of a rigid determinism. The influence of the stars and planets controlled their destiny, unless they had the secret knowledge necessary to escape that

control. It was precisely such knowledge that the false teachers may have claimed. Paul would then be warning the Colossians, some of whom had no doubt believed in astrology before their salvation, to avoid such false teaching. In either case, what these heretics offered was not an advance in spiritual knowledge, but a retreat to spiritual infancy and demonic doctrine (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1).

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