



Colossians 2:6–8

6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

Reflection

Something is up in the church at Colossae; but across the distance of now almost 2,000 years, it's hard for us to know specifically what. Last week we picked up a scent through the process known as mirror reading – an attempt to reconstruct the situation in Colosse based on the detail of Paul's letter to them. While we're only privy to one side of the conversation, chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the Colossians contains quite a few explicit indicators that give us a window into a controversy in the young church that is likely the reason for Paul writing to them. Friday's passage was a bit of a red flag. In it Paul warned the Colossians about about 'not being deceived by fine sounding arguments'. Our passage today contains a

further warning about those who would take others ‘captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy’ and later this week we will also learn in verse 16 that these people are ‘judging others’ and in verse 18 that they are ‘disqualifying them’.

Continuing our mirror reading, but on the flipside, Paul encourages the Colossians to maintain their disciplined and firm faith (2:5), and to hold onto the good teaching that they have received (verses 7 & 8). And of course, we’ve already seen Paul return time and time again to the power and the importance of the gospel which he will continue to do throughout the letter (e.g. 1:5–8, 23, 29; 2:2; 3:1-2, 16). So on the basis of our mirror reading, from the one side of the conversation that we possess, it is safe to assume that the Colos-

sian church was subject to some form of false teaching which was threatening to lead them astray.

But when we add into this mirror reading the particular nuances of Paul's Christology in chapter one, especially Paul's emphasis on the supremacy of Jesus Christ, and the way he repeats phrases like all the fullness of God dwelling in Christ, the mystery revealed in Christ and that all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ it becomes tempting to suggest that the false teaching running rife in the church at Colosse was a form of first-century Gnosticism. We can't know this for sure, the Bible simply doesn't say, and so it's important we don't base our interpretation of the text too closely on the specifics of this theory. But, as one recon-

struction of what might have been happening in Colosse, one commentator offers this explanation:

The problem [in Colosse] came from false teachers who were propagating what is called Gnosticism. Gnostics considered themselves to be people with superior knowledge who could help 'lesser' Christians attain a deeper spirituality. The very word for Gnosticism comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means 'to know'. The Gnostics, 'people in the know', the spiritual elite with all the answers, held as their basic doctrine that matter was evil and that only the spirit was good. They reasoned, therefore, that God could not be involved in creation, because being perfect he could not touch matter

which was intrinsically evil. Therefore, the world came into being through a complicated surrogate process as God put forth thousands of emanations (or lesser gods), each of which was a little more distant from him, so that finally there was an emanation (a little god) so distant from God that it could touch matter – and it created the world. Of course, this lesser god of creation was so far removed from the ultimate God that it was evil.

This reasoning led to belief that Jesus Christ, if he really was the Son of God, could not have taken on a human body because matter is evil. This delusion spawned the Gnostic romances about Jesus being only a ghost-like phantom. To the Gnostics, Christ was not Creator,

the incarnation was not real, and Christ was not enough! So the Gnostics built a system by which one could begin with Christ and work one's way up the series of emanations to God. In Colosse, this system consisted of ascetic disciplines (many borrowed from Jewish legalism), secret passwords (borrowed from Eastern mysticism), astrology, and elements of Christianity. It was all very complex and proudly intellectual. The Gnostics, 'those in the know', looked down upon the simple Colossian believers, browbeat them, and led some astray.

Paul's brilliant response is the letter to the Colossians, which presents Christ as the Creator and all-sufficient Saviour in the most sublime terms found

anywhere in Scripture.¹

And so against this possible backdrop, and certainly the backdrop of some form of insidious false teaching threatening the church, Paul continues his letter in today's passage, shaping up to confront these false teachers head-on, Colossians 2:6–8,

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¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ* (Preaching the Word; Westchester, Ill: Crossway Books, 1989), 14–15.

this world rather than on Christ.

Paul has greeted the Colossians, he's shared the intimate details of his prayer life with them and how hard he has been working night and day on their behalf, he's presented Jesus Christ in some of the most sublime terms in all of Scripture to them, and now out of his apostolic authority and the goodwill that he has built up in chapter one Paul takes direct aim at these false teachers. Verse 8,

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

The reason cults are cults is that they have defective doctrines of Jesus Christ. The Mormons, the Jehovah's witnesses, Christian Science and very likely the first-century Gnostics plaguing the Colossian church all say that they believe in Jesus – but the Jesus they claim to believe in is very different to the Jesus revealed to us in the Bible. In addition, cults mix in all sorts of other traditions and teachings often borrowed from a wide variety of religions. Greek Gnosticism taught that a person must work his or her way up a long series of lesser gods, called emanations, before reaching the ultimate god. But in the case of the Colossians, to this false teaching, Jewish teachers added Hebrew rites and ascetic regulations, as a better way to move up the spiritual ladder. It was all very mysterious, complicated, astro-

logical, and pious. But worst of all it was very deadly because it mixed some of the truth of the Hebrew religion with the delectable and enticing mysteries of Eastern mysticism and Greek philosophy.

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The language of Jesus is even more scathing as he accuses the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law of doing something similar in Mark 7,

13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have hand-

ed down.

A gospel blended together with Jewish traditions, Eastern mysticism and Greek philosophy is no gospel at all. The situation is deadly serious, and we'll reflect more on it over the course of this week.

Think

But with what time remains today meditate over what Paul instructs the Colossians to do in verse 6 & 7 to counter these hollow and deceptive philosophies. Certainly, in modern life we are just as at risk of falling prey to the latest ideas, and blending in the views and values of secular society in with our faith. The antidote according to Paul? Continuing to live our lives under Christ's Lordship. Then two metaphors:

a tree and a building; 'rooted' and 'built up' in him. Being strengthened in our faith by returning daily to what we have been taught. And overflowing in deliberate and constant thankfulness to God for the miracle that he has worked in our hearts. Have I just described you? Is this your trajectory as a Christian or are you being tossed in the wind of every latest idea? What secular philosophies might you be trying to co-mingle with your faith? Can you honestly draw clear lines between his worldly wisdom and the edicts of Scripture?

Pray

Close by praying through verses 6 & 7. Pray that you would continue to live under the lordship and protection of Jesus Christ, entrusting your life to him in obedience

and faith. Pray that you and I both, your church and your family would continue to rooted and built up in him, strengthened in our faith as we return daily to what we've been taught in the Scriptures, and in all of this that we might overflow continually in thankfulness to our God and Saviour. Father keep us safe from hollow and deceptive philosophies. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.