

**COLOSSIANS**  
Warning Against Vain Philosophy  
Colossians 2:8-10

INTRODUCTION

Colossians 2:8-23 is one of the most difficult passages Paul ever wrote. We are often confused because of strange terminology used by the Gnostic heretics. We are not acquainted with Gnosticism but the Colossians were and were fighting it so as to keep it from wrecking the church. While the terminology may be foreign to us, we know the Gnostic heresy is no different than modern heresies. In every case, they demean, demote and dethrone the person and work of Christ.

Paul counters this heretical teaching with truth. These false teachers were trying to draw the Colossians into empty and vain speculations which were outwardly tantalizing and inwardly destructive, and to follow them would lead to bondage and death. It was a subtle heresy because the Gnostics accepted Christ as part of their system but refused to acknowledge Him as God and said Christ was not enough to save, but there were other necessary additions. They boldly stated that the person and work of Christ alone was not sufficient to save.

Paul goes after this heresy by exposing the error and then going immediately to positive teaching about Christ. Paul knew the best defense against heresy is a positive offense for the truth. If one knows the truth, then he can discern error.

When Federal agents are trained on how to detect counterfeit money, they are not taught about all the possible designs of false printing. They are given for instance a real \$20.00 bill and they examine it and feel it over and over again until they know what a real bill is. Then they can detect counterfeit twenty dollar bills immediately.

So if we teach people about the Christ of the Bible, they will immediately be able to pick out heresy and cults because they are so well acquainted with the real thing.

The Gnostics said that one must have Jesus but also add to him their particular philosophy. The simple truth of Jesus Christ and Him crucified for salvation was not enough. Christ had to be supplemented by an elaborate system of pseudo-philosophical thought which was far too difficult for the simple and only the intellectually elite could understand. Gnosticism means "knowledge." They felt they alone had the right religion and interpretation of Christianity. If one accepted their philosophical system, they would be saved; if not, they would be lost.

One of the major marks of a cult is that it claims its particular understanding on Christianity is right and all others who do not accept it are wrong and headed for judgment (cf. Jehovah Witnesses, Mormans, Moonies).

THE PHILOSOPHIES OF MEN (2:8): *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy*, -- This is a command and could more literally be translated, "Take heed," "Be on the alert," "Be on your guard." This is obviously a clear warning to avoid hollow and deceptive philosophy. Many Christians seem to have a natural and perhaps prejudice against any concept of philosophy. They are like the church father Tertullian who said, "What was Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Someone said, "Philosophers are people who talk about something they do not understand and they make you think it is your fault." Someone else said, "Philosophy is man's attempt to befuddle himself scientifically." What does Paul mean by philosophy in this context? Is Paul giving a wholesale denial of the good of any philosophy? I think not. Paul is condemning hollow and empty philosophy apart from God. In the ancient world, the word "philosophy" was applied to anything that had to do with theories about God, the world and the meaning of life. The term itself is a noble one meaning "love of wisdom." Hebrew philosophy reasoned around God, and Greek philosophy reasoned around man; seeking to understand the world through the mind alone. Philosophy reached in zenith as the result of the teachings Socrates, Plato and Aristotle around 500 BC. Philosophy in and of itself is not wrong as long as one understands it is not the ultimate answer. Socrates, through inductive reasoning, concluded that sin needed to be forgiven, and he said, "It may be that God can forgive sin, but I do not see how." His reasoning could not take him to the cross, but the cross comes to us by divine revelation in Christ and the scriptures. The Apostle Paul is not degrading true philosophy as a science. He himself was a learned man taught in the secular university of Tarsus. He also sat at the feet of the famous philosopher Gamaliel. Paul was a great mind and surely knew most if not all the secular philosophies of his day. It is also valuable for modern Christians to understand something of the secular philosophies of their day in order to expose them and show their advocates Christ.

Paul is opposing hollow and deceptive philosophy that takes a person no where, and that was what Gnosticism did. It was non-sense and not grounded in reality. In fact, Paul says it takes men captive to his own mind and ultimately to the Devil's thinking. Here is a bit of modern, befuddled, non-sensical thinking:

"A philosopher says we are not what we think we are; we are what we think. Well, then, if we are what we think, we are, are we not - or are we?"

Another illustration of philosophy which is a sham comes from a statement from the ancient Antisthenes. When he was asked what was the advantage to be derived from philosophy, he answered, "It enables me to keep company with myself." Vanity, all vanity! Janis Joplin, a famous rock singer in the sixties said this, "Being an intellectual creates a lot of questions and no answers. You can fill your life up with ideas and still go home lonely. All you really have that really matters are feelings." Janis Joplin was a modern day existentialist and took her own life by an overdose of drugs - her feelings gave her no answers. Vanity, all vanity! Life apart from God, Christ and the scriptures is a joke.

If philosophy is a search for greater clarity and wisdom to the nature of reality, then Christianity is the supreme philosophy. In the grandest sense, theology is the greatest philosophy. We must remember that the Bible puts no premium on ignorance. Christians should be well read, thinkers and on the cutting edge of society, constantly calling men and women to faith and repentance to Christ.

What Paul may be warning against is Christians becoming philosophers (not against studying philosophy) for faith and dependence in God should dominate one's life not rationalism and independence.

After The Tradition Of Men: *Which depends on human tradition.* -- The Gnostics were in the habit of claiming that their special teaching had been told by word of mouth from Jesus, Mary, Matthew or Peter but they were never recorded. These unrecorded so-called facts were passed down to the enlightened and the intellectually elite. Also there were pagan theories passed down by mouth but never recorded. What the Gnostics were claiming is that they had oral tradition and revelation that the ordinary Christian did not have. But Paul says these were human things; the product of the human mind and have no basis in scripture. For instance, one of the teachings of the Gnostics was that there were many angelic mediators between God and man. This had no basis in reality and was contrary to basic Christian teaching. ***“For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”*** (I Tim. 2:5).

So many of the cults today claim special revelation or additional revelation to Christ and the Bible. The Christian Scientists claim the writings of Mary Baker Eddy are additional revelation. The Seventh Day Adventists claim the teachings of Ellen White and Mormons claim additional revelation in the Book of Mormon. They all claim Christ is not sufficient in and of Himself to save but there must be additional information.

After The Basic Principles Of The World: *And the basic principles of the world...* -- The wording of “principles of the world” may refer to elementary, ABC's of knowledge. If this be the meaning, then Paul is saying that the Gnostic system, though touted as advanced philosophy is really only simple, rudimentary knowledge because it is at best human reasoning. However, it is my suspicion, that there is another meaning to “principles of the world.” It might be translated “elemental spirits of the world,” referring to the pagan religion of the first century which related spirits to the stars and planets. Astrology permeated all the thought life of the proponents of the pagan religions. It is impossible for us to realize how dominated the ancient world was by the idea of the influence of the elemental spirits and planets. Astrology was in the ancient world the queen of sciences. Roman rulers like Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius and Vespasian would make no move without consulting the stars. Alexander the Great worshipped the stars. If a man was born under a fortunate star all was well. If he was born under an unlucky star he could look for unhappiness. If any undertaking was to have a chance at success, the stars had to be observed. Men were the slaves of the stars. The Gnostics said there was one way to escape star slavery. If they knew the Gnostics right passwords and the right secret formula, they might escape from the fatalistic influence of the stars.

Paul's point is that this philosophy based on the stars can be escaped but only through Christ. A person needs nothing but Christ to overcome superstition or any power in the universe. Christ alone is sufficient to deliver from all evil influences.

There are millions of people in the U.S.A. who take astrology seriously. They wear signs of the Zodiac charms and read their horoscope in the newspaper daily. And I might say that many professing Christians read their horoscopes because men are basically superstitious, and they are not committed to the revelation found in the Bible.

I once knew a pastor's wife whose husband had a very large Baptist church. She was a Christian and I knew her personally. But she liked to read her horoscope everyday in the newspaper. She said she did it just for fun, but it showed her ignorance in the background of paganism from which the horoscope came. I think there are many Christians like this woman. Superstitious and curious.

I hold in my hand from the Orlando Sentinel two articles written everyday - Ann Landers and Horoscope. The Horoscope shows that the pagan religions of Rome and Greece have never really left us. And Ann Landers is another false teacher because she teaches everybody's god is O.K. and morality is relative. I wonder how many so called Christians get advice from one or both of these columns daily?

Not After Christ: ***Rather than on Christ.*** -- Whatever the defects in the Gnostic system were, they were not after Christ. It somehow demeaned and dethroned Christ from the central place. They supplemented angels and spirits for Christ. They did not give Christ the supreme place in their system. Jesus Christ is the pole-star of theology. Any cult system is to be rejected if it does not conform to the scriptural teachings about Christ.

Cults might call Christ a good man; others a prophet; still others might call Him the best of all men; a few might refer to Him as divine but not God. But the Bible says that Jesus Christ is God come in the flesh and any teaching which denies that truth is heresy.

THE FULLNESS OF THE GODHEAD (2:9): ***For in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form,***

Christ Is Fully God. The "for" takes us back to what just preceded. It is unthinkable that these Colossian Christians would go back into the slavery of Gnosticism when they had been delivered by the sovereign Christ from sin, the spirits, Satan, judgment and hell in Christ.

Paul says that "all the fullness of the Deity lives" in Christ. The very essence of God with all His qualities and attributes lives in Christ. The Gnostics referred to God as the plaroma (fullness). For them God was plaroma, fullness, completeness. By using the Gnostics own terminology, Paul shows that Christ is deity, God come in the flesh.

Christ Is Real Humanity: It says Christ is deity in bodily form. God took on a human nature. God dwells in a body, the body of Jesus Christ. Gnostics thought Christ had ghostlike qualities and not a real body because in their system all matter was evil and a body is matter. If Christ had a real body, then He would be evil. So they rejected a real humanity of Christ. But Paul says, “Deity lives in bodily form.” In the Incarnation, Christ became a man, being made gloriously tangible and accessible to us. And at His ascension His humanity was glorified. Right now, God sits in heaven with a real body!

THE FULLNESS OF THE CHRISTIAN (2:10): *And you have been given fullness in Christ, who is head over every power and authority.*

Christians are Full In Christ. Paul says, “You have been given fullness in Christ.” This statement boggles the thinking mind. Christ is fullness of deity and we Christians share that fullness in Christ. We Christians are made full because of our relationship with Christ. We cannot share all of deity because some attributes like omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence and infinity are not transferable. But other attributes are transferable such as love, light, eternal, mercy, grace and peace, and it is in this sense that the Christian is full or complete in Christ. Because of the Christians spiritual union with Christ every spiritual need can be fully met. Possessing Christ, we possess all! All that the Christian needs, he already has in Christ. Christians have no need of anything else because they have all things in Christ. Christ is all and all we need. The Christian, however, must appropriate what he possesses in Christ and this is done by faith, not philosophy or rationalism. Christians don’t need additional truth, another ecstatic experience, a new revelation, a new philosophy of life. Christians have Christ and that is all we need. *“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”* (II Pet 1:3,4). As Wesley put it, “Thou O Christ are all I need. More than all in Thee I find.”

Christians Worship Christ Alone. It says of Christ, “Who is the head over every power and authority.” The Gnostics were pushing angel worship as part of their philosophical system. In Colossians 2:18, it says, *“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.”* Paul declared that Christ is the head, the ruler, the Creator of all angelic beings. Therefore, He is God and He alone is worthy of our worship. Remember, to grant Christ anything less than full deity is anti-Christ!!

## CONCLUSION

Would you like to be full of love, grace, peace and mercy and sense a sufficiency about life and death? You can if you will receive Christ as your Savior for sin and as Lord of your life.

You can stop looking. Christ is the answer. Christ is your hope. Christ is your sufficiency but that will only become a reality when you through faith accept Christ as your savior.