

# *Beware Of Deceivers*

Colossians 2:8-12

PREPARED BY  
KEN GEHRELS  
PASTOR  
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH OF OTTAWA  
ONTARIO, CANADA

(This series on Colossians is drawn from pericope divisions, titles and summaries prepared by N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone – The Prison Letters*, London, Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002.)

At first glance, tonight's reading sounds rather provocative.

"Let no one take you captive through philosophy..."

If you wanted to, it might be possible to read this as though the use of reason, and the search for and love of wisdom is a bad thing, something that enslaves humanity; as if what we need, really, is a dumbed-down simplicity of mind.

Which is not what the Word of God means... at all.

Paul is actually delivering a whitty pun.

The word he uses for "to take captive" (v.8) is

*sylagogein*

Which, if you were a first century reader, looks immediately like, and would be understood immediately to be a deliberate play on the word

*synagogue*

It is an intentional, and very specific, shot across the bow of first-century Judaism.

The ancient Jews, especially in communities that had been influenced by Greek culture, which would have include Colosse, liked to position their religion as a philosophy.

Why?

Because everyone else did, too.

They sold it as a system of thought to help organize and understand life.

And these same people were putting pressure on first-century Christians, in Colosse and elsewhere. "Jesus is fine," they would say. "But there's more to spirituality and life than that. There are other factors to consider, too. And certain rituals and practices that you'll want to act out regularly."

And Paul says, "No."

Don't go there.

You'll find yourself getting all chained down, and locked in spiritually, taken captive in ways that you really don't want to experience.

Be careful, says the bible, about systems of thinking that appear wonderfully wise and full and good, but are – really – just the development of human minds.

Because at the end of the day, they'll take you down.

Paul isn't against philosophy per se.

Basically, the word simply means "a love of wisdom."

And in the verses immediately before our reading, a love of the right sort of wisdom is encouraged (Col 1:28).

Loving wisdom is good.

Thinking is good – a gift from God.

The question is – what.... or..... *WHO*.... is at the centre of it?

Another translation puts it this way:

*Be careful not to allow anyone to captivate you through an empty, deceitful philosophy that is according to human traditions and the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. (Col 2:8)*

....*According to human traditions....*

When our system of thought, the way we want to organize and value and live the most important core pieces of our life,

when that has, at its central core, the value of human reason, we're on a dangerous, even dead-end,

path.

Watch out for that, says the Bible.

AND....

....*the elemental spirits of the universe*....

Don't be taken in by spiritual practices that you'll discover during your travels around the globe – spirit forces worshipped in this province or that country.

Just because a group of people have done so for a long time, or perhaps even a whole culture has built up around them, doesn't automatically make it right.

In fact, these sorts of things can wrap themselves around your soul and constrict it.

They can chain down your heart and leave you spiritually captive.

Friends, please be aware that this is not just a one-time problem for a few dead guys two thousand years ago. The grammar of v.8 for the word "*take captive*" indicates that this is an ongoing challenge. It is an ever-present danger. Including for us.

You can hear all sorts of conversation today that sounds very spiritual.

Just last week I followed the Facebook posting of someone experimenting with a particular spiritual ritual because, this person said, "*It seems good for me right now.*" Has nothing to do with the Bible, but this individual found it enticing; the argument for it seemed compelling.

Be careful!!

Such ideas and practices may be based on philosophies developed by various thinkers in all sorts of time periods of human history.

OR

They may draw from spiritual traditions that are found in various parts of the world that we may visit. The Taoist tradition of Eastern Asia, for example. There are some very appealing elements to that philosophy: compassion, moderation, and humility, a relationship with nature, contemplation. Good things, yes?

Or one that is very in vogue across our nation – and that is very politically incorrect to challenge on any level - native spirituality. Some even view it as oppressive or imperialist to raise questions about it at all. A respect for ancestors. A carefulness with nature. Connecting to the spirit world. How can you argue with that?

And so it was for the Colossians.

Ancient Jews asked them, "Don't you think it right to be involved in annual festivals and rituals that symbolize your devotion and dedication to God? Isn't it good to carefully follow the 10 commandments and all that follows from them? Can't you see the benefit of circumcision.... that is, being willing to mark your own body with a sign of surrender and devotion to God? We've practiced this for hundreds of years. You really ought to not let go of these now...."

Deep, life-encompassing, traditional rituals of faith – what could be wrong with that?

The Bible asks one simple question in response:

Sure it may be an ancient tradition, a venerable school of thought.

Yes, it may be the spiritual practice of a particular culture for centuries.

But where does the person of Jesus fit in?

Watch out for any system of thought, or any type of spiritual practice that is

(check out the end of verse 8)

**".....not according to Christ.."**

You know, it is amazing how easily and quickly we can get taken in and all wrapped up with one or another spiritual practice or philosophy. And many of them comes with the sales pitch that offers greater fulfillment or peace or inner security or wellness.

Please understand that all such offers are, fundamentally, idolatrous.

Remember what an idol is?

An idol is any **good** thing or idea  
that is given **ultimate** significance.

Environmental care.

Meditation.

Searching for justice.

All very good things.

But when they are raised to a spiritual plane that supposedly connects to our fundamental spiritual worth and significance, then each of these things becomes an idol.

There is only one philosophy that needs to be at the centre of our life.

The philosophy that is a person:

Jesus Christ.

Period.

Why?

Because it doesn't get any more ultimate, any more real, or any more spiritual than him.

In him, says verse 9:

*the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.*

Understand that very clearly, please.

There are two words that Paul could have used here.

The first is

*theiotes*

And the second is

*theotes*

Only one letter difference.

But they are miles apart in meaning.

The first means "divine like qualities."

The second means "the essence of God."

God-like characteristics. Godly. Holy. Ueber-spiritual.

That's the first.

The full and complete nature of God himself.

That's the second.

And that second is Jesus.

Are we splitting hairs?

Far from it.

Paul is declaring that Jesus, the very real and resurrected man, is the fullness of God.

He is not merely one part of a religious system.

He is not one deity within a larger pantheon of spirit beings.

He is not someone super closely connected to spiritual reality.

He is the essence of ultimate reality himself.

Ancient readers would have got the difference.

In their day there was a lot of mythology centred around demi-gods, "almost-gods."

Hercules is an example of that – a child from the alliance between a god and a human; one who did mighty acts. Can you see how Jesus might be confused with that?

The Hindu faith also has examples of that – either children of gods and people, or people who lived

such a life that along the way they became gods (*devas*).

In fact, history is littered with claims of thinkers suggesting that this is exactly the case with Jesus.

An almost-god.

Or one who, along the way, became godly.

Or – he lived a human life, and after death his spirit was raised to a god-like state.

That is **not** what we believe.

Jesus is, in his very physical body, the full essence of God.

That's the bible's teaching.

And if you want to take the bible seriously, that's what you're called to believe.

Any less is to sell short the message of Scripture.

Jesus is no great guru who maps out a plan for spiritual fulfillment in our lives.

He is not an enlightened one who points the way to some higher state of consciousness.

He does not provide us the connection to God.

He **IS** God.

Fully.

Completely.

In his body life – He is God.

He is the one who brings fullness and fulfillment to our lives.

And any other thought system or spiritual claim will need to surrender to Him.

Any system that cannot surrender to the claim, "Jesus is God" is one that we must reject.

For it has overstepped its bounds.

And any such system will, along with all creation, have to bow its knee one day before him and declare, as Philippians 2 says,

*that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

He can bring us the fullness of God;

the love, the power, the richness of God flows into humanity and all creation through Christ. [Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* TNTC]

And ONLY through him.

Enter the talk in verse 11 and 12 about circumcision and baptism.

Bottom line – they come together in Him.

Circumcision from the Old Testament side.

Baptism from the New Testament side.

Both rituals representing the same reality.

Both converging on, and finding their meaning in, him.

Circumcision was the poster child of Jewish religion.

An outer symbol of an inner reality.

The foreskin was cut off, and in the bloody shedding of the skin of the part of the male body that is tied to reproduction,

the part that represents life,

in the act of cutting away and putting off ,

the life of the person, and all the heirs of that person was declared to be holy to God.

It was an outer action.

And it was done at the very early, helpless stage of a person's life.

Eight days old if they were born into the community of faith.

But it followed them their whole life long!

Circumcised people and their families were called to live out, as a deep, inner reality that which the outer act signified.

And so there is talk all through the Old Testament about circumcised hearts.  
(check Leviticus 26:40-42; Deuteronomy 10:12-16; Deuteronomy 30:4-6;  
Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25-26; Ezekiel 44:6-9; Acts 7:51-53).

A circumcised heart was the heart of a person fully humbled before God, living a life devoted to God, surrendered to God.

It was the heart of someone who belonged to God; part of the family of God.

It was the heart of someone on whom all the blessings and promises of God were poured out.

Jews were connecting with Colossian Christians and telling them that they still needed this ritual act that had been so symbolic for hundreds of years .

"You're not complete without it" they were told.

"Oh yes you are!" says the Bible.

You are complete because of a greater circumcision.

When Mel Gibson produced *Passion Of The Christ* secular critics took swipes at it, in part because it was so bloody.

Interesting, don't you think, when the same ones would give a "two thumbs up" to equally bloody secular films.

Anyway – "too bloody" they said.

The reality is – Christianity **IS** a bloody religion. Not out of fascination. But because the life of Jesus had to be surrendered as a sacrifice for our lives to be set free.

He was, in his full body, cut up and put off so that we might be declared holy to God.

And we who surrender our life to him are called to live a life in devotion to him, surrendered to him.

To live with devoted hearts as people who belong to him, part of his family.

Knowing that as we doing, all the blessings and promises of God will be poured out onto us.

When do we connect with the circumcision of Jesus?

At the moment of our baptism.

Now, we could get our shorts all in a theological knot about the act having magical significance in itself. Which is not the road down which the Bible is going.

It is simply describing baptism as the New Testament action that initiates believers into the family of faith – same as what circumcision did in the Old Testament.

It connects us with Jesus' death and resurrection.

If you want a fuller reading about this, head to Romans 6:3-11, where Paul clearly connects baptism with the death and resurrection of Jesus. And in that event we put off the old life of sin, and take up the cleansed life of fullness in God.

How?

How does that inner connection happen in this outer, physical act of baptism?

Do you see the answer in the last half of verse 12?

*through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.*

No different than circumcision.

The outer act is nothing without the inner heart of faith.

A circumcised body needs a circumcised heart.

A baptised body needs a baptised heart.

A heart of faith, devoted to Jesus Christ.

A heart that lives out what Galatians 3:27 speaks of when it says, "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*"

Deep identifying with the person and the work, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To experience the life of God, to experience the full power and promises and inheritance of God, we need to surrender the heart in faith to Jesus Christ.

To surrender from the core to the outside of our being to Jesus Christ.

Not Jesus-AND.

Not Jesus-OR.

Just Jesus.

Fully Jesus.

No other ritual expression.

No additional experience.

No added rite or action or habit.

Nothing!

Friends, there are many voices – here in our city, on university campuses, and across the internet – that speak the same sort of seductive calls as were heard by the Colossians.

The challenge for us and our children is the same today as it was 2000 years ago for Colossian believers and their children.

May we be found as singularly faithful to Jesus Christ as they were.