

“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.”
—Colossians 2:8 (NASB)

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus is probably a name you do not recognize. You know him by the short version—**Tertullian**. Tertullian lived from about AD 155 to about AD 240 in Carthage, North Africa—across the Mediterranean Sea from Italy. Although he was trained in Stoic philosophy, he later converted to Christianity and became one of the early church’s most famous defenders of the faith. He is often called the “father of western theology,” and wrote a notable work against early threats to Christianity entitled *Prescription against Heretics*.

Perhaps the most enduring fruit of Tertullian’s ministry is his contribution to theological terminology. In response to a heretic named Sabellius who taught that God wore different “masks” to reveal Himself to man (sometimes the “mask” of the Father, sometimes the “mask” of the Son, and sometimes the “mask” of the Holy Spirit), Tertullian sought a term that best summarized the Bible’s teaching on the three-in-oneness of the divine essence. He invented the Latin term *trinitas*, from which we derive the English word “Trinity.”

But Tertullian is also known for another expression that is often cited in discussions about the relationship between theology and philosophy. In chapter seven of his book, *Prescription against Heretics*, he writes,

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary [outstanding] faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides.

In asking the question, “**What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?**,” Tertullian is not thinking about geography. Rather, he is making a distinction between *man’s reasoning*—represented in its highest achievements by the philosophical schools in Athens—and the incomparable value of *God’s revelation*—represented by Jerusalem, the center point of God’s redemptive activity. Tertullian recognized that one of the great threats posed to the early church was the threat of *syncretism*—the effort to accommodate the Christian message with the prevailing ideologies of the day, to find places of “common ground” between the gospel and the culture, to supplement Christianity with the best of the tools and frameworks produced by the world.

Tertullian’s concern was not original. The Apostle Paul had warned of the same danger 175 years earlier in his letter to the Colossians. The church in Colossae was not started by Paul himself. In fact, there’s no evidence that Paul ever visited the city. Instead, its founder was a man by the name of Epaphras (Col 1:7), who most likely became a disciple of Paul during Paul’s lengthy ministry in the city of Ephesus (Acts 19; AD 52–55). So effective was Paul’s teaching that newly-trained missionaries like Epaphras took the gospel all over the Roman province of Asia (Acts 19:9–10)—and this would have included Colossae, a city 120 miles to the east.

Problems started to develop several years into the Colossian church’s existence. Epaphras noticed efforts being made by clever false teachers who sought to inflict damage on the church. Their *modus operandi* was not to call upon the Colossian Christians to reject the gospel outright, but to invite them to assimilate ideas from the culture into their existing worldview. Deeply concerned about this trend (Col 4:12–13), Epaphras left Colossae to meet with his teacher, Paul—who at the time was under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30–31). Hearing Epaphras’ concerns, Paul takes up his pen to write a letter to the church about the exclusivity and superiority of Christ and His gospel. The foundational exhortation of the letter is found in 2:8, “**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.**”

I. The Urgent Warning

The heart of Paul's exhortation is summarized by the words **"See to it that no one takes you captive"** (Col 2:8a). The language of the original has a definite sense of urgency. Based on Epaphras' report, Paul is troubled that there is a clear and present danger that lurks outside the walls of the church. His exhortation "See to it" has the idea of **"Realize that something is hazardous!"** or **"Watch out!"** It is the same language used in other warning texts like Philippians 3:2, where Paul exclaims to the Philippians, **"Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision!"**

What was Paul concerned about in particular? He was alarmed at how quickly the Colossian believers could be **"taken captive."** The meaning of the verb is "to gain control by carrying off as spoil," "to exploit," or even, "to kidnap." In essence, Paul is saying to the Colossian church, "Don't let anyone carry you off as plunder!" Of course, Paul was not worried about a literal abduction of church members. But he believed a figurative one was possible.

Paul recognized that ideas are not neutral or docile. Instead, they *captive* and *control*. In the good sense, the truths of the gospel had already captivated these believers, resulting in their rescue them from "the domain of darkness" and their transfer into "the kingdom of [God's] beloved Son" (Col 1:13). They had been captivated by the reality that Jesus Christ was Lord (2:6), and so were already following His will. But if they acquiesced to the efforts of the false teachers, the power of the gospel's ideas would be diluted. Instead, other ideas would bewitch them, altering their beliefs, affections, attitudes, and conduct in adverse ways.

As the entire letter to the Colossians shows, the problem was not that these devious teachers promoted ideas that were directly opposed to the gospel. From what we can tell from the letter, they did not advocate a stark return to pagan immorality and emperor worship. Instead, their danger was in their half-truths. They used similar terminology and incorporated analogous themes, making their error more difficult to discern. They promoted a religion that in so many ways looked respectable. They took the best of Greek culture, combined it with the best of Judaism, and added it to the gospel. Commentator F. F. Bruce (*Colossians*, 98) describes it as follows:

The spiritual confidence-tricksters against whom they are put on their guard did not inculcate a godless or immoral way of life: the error of such teaching would have been readily exposed. Their teaching was rather a blend of the highest elements of religion known to Judaism and paganism; it was, in fact, a philosophy.

II. The Insidious Threat

Paul then identifies the *means* by which the Colossian Christians could be taken captive: **"through philosophy and empty deception"** (Col 2:8b). The term "philosophy" (φιλοσοφία, *philosophia*) is found only here in the New Testament. It is made up of two other terms: φίλος (*philos*) meaning "friend" or "lover," and σοφία (*sophia*), meaning "wisdom." Simply stated, philosophy is "the love of wisdom," and a philosopher is a "lover of wisdom."

In his use of the term **"philosophy,"** Paul was not condemning the love of wisdom in general, nor was he prohibiting any study or awareness of the different wisdom systems of the world. Paul himself shows significant understanding of the philosophical schools of Athens in his sermon before the Areopagus on Mars Hill, where he systematically contradicts the tenets of the Epicurean and Stoic worldviews (cf. Acts 17:22–31). In fact, the term "philosophy" in Paul's day was used widely to refer to any ethical or religious system of beliefs. For example, it was used by the Jewish historian Josephus to describe the different views of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Rather, Paul's use of the term "philosophy" probably reflects the language used by the false teachers themselves. To promote their message, they referred to their ideas as a "philosophy." Consequently, Paul called upon the Colossians to reject such a "philosophy." It purported to be "wisdom" (*sophia*), but it was nothing of the sort.

Paul then adds another description to this message: **"and empty deception."** The term "deception" refers simply to "deceitfulness" or "trickery." The same term is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe what the serpent did to Eve: "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (Gen 3:13b, LXX). In the New Testament, *wealth* is said to be "deceitful," as is *sin* in general (Matt 13:22; Heb 3:13). Ultimately, the emphasis of this word

is on the effort **to disguise as real what is contrary to reality**. In a sense, the ideas being promoted in Colossae wore masks. They promised religious enlightenment and power, but behind the façade was **“emptiness.”** Paul makes direct reference to this a little later in Colossians when he writes, “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*] in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Col 2:23).

Paul adds a further description to this insidious threat to the church: this deceptive and empty philosophy was established according to two standards: **“according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world” (2:8b)**. These are the wells from which competing religious ideology is drawn.

The first of these two standards is easily identifiable: **“the tradition of men.”** Mankind is in the business of manufacturing and propagating well-polished religious ideas. Contrary to what many think, sin has generally *not* made man anti-religious (although in some cases he does become such). Instead, sin has made man obsessively religious—but all in the wrong direction. Sinful men create whole systems and societies of sincere, sacrificial, and self-deprecating adherents, and then fight feverishly to pass these on to future generations. These traditions are obvious both in the Jewish system (cf. Mark 7:8–13) and in the Gentile system (cf. 1 Pet 1:18). And in Colossae, it was a mix of these traditions which was being promoted to the church.

The second of these two standards is more difficult to interpret: **“the elementary principles of the world”** (see also Col 2:20). The word translated as “elementary principles” in its most basic use referred to that which was “placed side by side in a row,” such as the letters of the alphabet—the ABCs of learning. The writer of Hebrews uses the term in this sense in Hebrews 5:12. The word was also used to refer to the basic material elements of the earth—often identified as earth, water, wind, and fire. The Apostle Peter uses the term in this kind of sense in 2 Peter 3:10–12. But it is probably a third sense which is in view here in Colossians 2:8, the sense of “influential, spiritual forces” or “beings.” Here Paul’s use of the same term in **Galatians sheds light**:

- **Galatians 4:3** – “So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.”
- **Galatians 4:8–11** – “However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? . . . You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.”

In Galatians, as likely here in Colossians, Paul is pointing to the spiritual forces behind humanity’s religious and philosophical ideas. Although unredeemed man has no limits to his creative ability to invent false ideas, there is something more sinister behind it all: *demonic forces*. In other words, the supernatural forces of evil are never passive in the battle over minds. This is why Paul elsewhere states, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*” (Eph 6:12). This reality greatly heightens the vigilance necessary on the part of Christians. Menacing unseen forces are at work, working together with the seen (cf. 2 Cor 11:13–15).

III. The Matchless Standard

In a final, simple statement, Paul draws the Colossians back to the ultimate, supreme standard according to which all their thinking was to be measured: **“rather than according to Christ” (2:8c)**. Indeed, believers are to be *taken captive!* But there is only one person to whom they are to render total intellectual, moral, and spiritual allegiance—*Christ!* Why? Paul’s letter to the Colossians is filled with reasons. Consider several of them in the near context. Believers are to be captive to Him because:

- **Colossians 2:3** – “in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”
- **2:9** – “in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.”
- **2:10** – “in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.”
- **2:11** – “in Him you were also [spiritually] circumcised.”

“Wherefore all theology, when separated from Christ, is not only vain and confused, but is also mad, deceitful, and spurious; for, though the philosophers sometimes utter excellent sayings, yet they have nothing but what is short-lived, and even mixed up with wicked and erroneous sentiments.” —John Calvin

How must we respond?

1. **Don’t dance on the edges.** Many Christians consider it to be a virtue to see how much “common ground” they can find with error. Others are always looking for ways to “redeem” the culture. Others are infatuated with whatever is new and trendy. But taking the Athenian approach to ideas (cf. Acts 17:21) is a certain way to be exploited by the tradition of men and the ideology of demons.

“Tell me, what is the sense of this itch for idle speculation? What does it prove, this useless affection of a fastidious curiosity, notwithstanding strong confidence of its assertions? It is highly appropriate that Thales, while his eyes were roaming the heavens in astronomical observation, should have tumbled into a well. This mishap may well serve to illustrate the fate of all who occupy themselves with the stupidities of philosophy.”

—Tertullian

2. **Don’t let your thoughts run wild.** Ideas not only have consequences—they also have *roots*. Take nothing for granted. Always attempt to trace the source of your ideas. Ask yourself, “Can I trace these controlling ideas in my life to the fountain of Christ and His gospel?” If they do not run back to Christ and show allegiance to Him, then something is dangerously wrong. Paul’s urgent warning is just as relevant for the church in 2022 as it was for the church in Colossae in AD 62.

“No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry:

‘Mine!’” —Abraham Kuyper

3. **Don’t add to the simplicity of the gospel.** The Colossian heresy didn’t attempt to discard the gospel of Jesus Christ outright; it sought to supplement it. That is an important lesson to learn, for our biggest challenges will be precisely there. Christians can usually identify and reject outright error with ease (atheism, pantheism, polytheism, etc.). But the struggle is with identifying the things *added* to the gospel, slowly—perhaps intentionally, perhaps even unwittingly. Christians must fight continually to remove the spiritual barnacles that get attached to the gospel.
4. **Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.** There is no hope without complete surrender to Him.

For Further Study

1. Memorize Colossians 2:8.
2. Our age is no different than that of the Colossian church. There are always insidious ideological threats lurking at the door. Can you identify those that seek to take Christians captive today? Describe several.
3. Why are Christians so often gullible when it comes to new ideas or movements?
4. Describe several ways that Christians today are “dancing on the edges” of Christianity. Why is this so dangerous? Are you one who finds these edges attractive?
5. Why must we always be fighting for the simplicity of the gospel? How does this look in personal, everyday life?

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: May 11, 7pm, “Admonish One Another” (by Matthew Heller)