

FREEDOM VERSUS FALSEHOOD

by Steve Zeisler

I want to invite you to do a very difficult thing this morning: Imagine me to be the glib, air-headed host of the television game show *Let's Make a Deal*, grinning with capped teeth and filled with phony enthusiasm and good will. This is the game show where people get all sorts of goodies---for instance, \$10,000, a trip to Europe, a new car. Then I invite them to trade in everything they have just won for what is behind the door on the stage behind me. Time after time they make the trade. The door opens and there's a bale of alfalfa or some equally terrible surprise. They give up true riches and real advantages and come away with nothing in their place.

Why would anyone do that? With the range of riches they have in their possession, what would ever make them want to trade these advantages for what's behind the door? Well, that phenomenon takes place in settings other than this game show. Men and women over the centuries have been tempted time and again to give up riches in Christ and gain nothing in return. They have listened to the glib patter of deceivers who deny the first place that Christ deserves in our lives, thinking, and worship; who offer them some phony alternative and take away everything they have.

DENYING DECEPTION

In Colossians 2 we are going to encounter Paul's teaching about the error that had invaded the church in Colossae. He alluded to it earlier, but this is his most direct discussion of the deceivers who had infiltrated this young church. Paul says, "Let no one delude you with persuasive argument." At times we find very powerful the persuasion to give away what we have in Christ and grab something else; we are attracted by the mystery behind the door on the stage, by tantalizing possibilities.

Let's briefly take a tour of chapter 2 to identify these deceivers. Paul says in verse 4:

I say this in order that no one [and he has some specific people in mind] may delude you with persuasive argument.

Verse 8 says:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

It wasn't just delusion that these people were advancing; they were taking the Colossians captive. There were bad motives behind what they were doing. These deceivers were going to deliberately and selfishly take for themselves the life, hope, energy, and joy of these young Christians. They were going to use these Christians for their own ends if they were allowed to.

Verse 16 describes some of the ways phony religion operates when it takes over a life:

Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day---

The people who sell the deception behind the door on the stage end up becoming supreme in the lives of those who listen to them. They have taken people captive and have begun to run their lives. What starts as the promise of something exotic, wonderful, and enriching becomes in fact a form of slavery. Time and again you

see young believers who have been caught up in these kinds of deceptions lose their freedom and hope as they become more and more frightened, more under the thumb of those who are selling the deception, and more judged or restricted by them.

In verse 20 he says:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!"

There is an accelerating loss of life. Fewer and fewer things are acceptable, more and more phony rules and ridiculous prohibitions apply. People's lives become reduced, filled with fear, and hemmed in.

PHONY RELIGION

Scholars have spent a good bit of time in the last century writing about the heresy that had invaded Colossae. There have been many Ph.D. dissertations written on it, and this is probably still an open field because no one has conclusively determined in detail what was being taught to undermine the faith of the Colossians.

It is clear that the deceivers were not offering them rank, godless selfishness. They were not saying, "Let's get drunk, frequent prostitutes, and live lives of debauchery." Nor were they saying, "Let's be greedy money grubbers who care nothing for people, God, or anything else." They weren't as obviously destructive as either of those. They were religious; they used the language of God and the name of Christ, and there are references here to baptism, circumcision, festivals and holidays, holy experience, the law, tradition, and so forth. That was what made these deceivers so effective.

Some scholars have concluded that Judaism is behind Paul's warnings because references are made to the Sabbath, circumcision, and so on. Some say it was the mysticism of the first-century Essenes, some the mysticism of the Merkabah sect of Jews or other Jewish myths. Others say that if those elements were there they were only minor issues, not the main problem; the early Gnostics were really the source of deception.

Still others say it was neither the Gnostics nor the Jews. It was more likely classic Greek philosophy, such as Platonism or neo-Pythagoreanism. Some scholars say it was the pagan mystery cults that were everywhere around the Mediterranean in the first century, those old, dark religions of the worship of demons, powers of darkness, and the unknown with mysterious chants and language that invited power to change people's lives. People were drawn into these mystery religions that were everywhere in the ancient world. Others see behind Paul's concern the lure of Iranian redemption myths or the Isis mysteries of Egypt. A temple to Apollo has an inscription that may or may not be pertinent to what was taking place in Colossae; the Homeric hymn to Demeter may be pertinent as well--on and on.

Pagan, Jewish, Greek; from the desert, from the cities; from pagan darkness, from the light of Judaism--any of these sources could in fact create religious ideas, and beckonings to win people away from Christ. I'm convinced that the reason we don't know for sure what the problem was that plagued Colossae is that then we wouldn't be as well-defended against all the other forms of deception that might creep in our day. We need to be on the alert from every direction--from the secular humanists of our day who deny the existence of God for all practical purposes and yet use religious language to take over people's lives; from the well-known cults that have existed for most of the twentieth century; from the New Age thinking that has thrown up any number of new cults around us--any kind of religious language that would appeal to the spirit of human beings but in fact take the place of Christ. We must heed the warning sounding throughout this second chapter of Colossians.

NO SHORT CUTS

The question that comes back again is, why would anybody ever go for any of this? Why would we who have everything in Christ ever listen to some other alternative, or set it aside for what is behind the door on the stage? Let's go back through this chapter now to understand some of Paul's testimony as to why these things happen and to be fortified and strengthened by what we learn here. Chapter 2, verses 6-8:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. 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.

There are two helpful images that the apostle draws to begin with. He says first of all that as you have received the Lord, or as you have been born again and started a new life, in the same way walk in him. Paul may have been thinking of raising a baby. When a little child starts out she receives life from her parents and is born into the world, and at first she is unable to go very far. Then she becomes a toddler who can walk somewhat shakily and uncertainly. Eventually she learns to really walk. She can venture farther and learns more of the dangers of life. Finally they can let her cross a busy street, and become more independent. In spiritual things the life is imparted to you to begin with, but you have to learn to "walk;" there's a process, a period of growth that takes place before you can trust yourself to walk farther and farther into different kinds of circumstances, before you're mature enough to handle various things. What Paul is saying is that the beginning point ought, over the period of growing and maturing, to lead to greater freedom, insight, and potential.

The other image he uses is that of a root. "Having been firmly rooted" might refer to a tree that has roots that go into the ground. It is a bit fragile to start with, and then it becomes more established, more firmly rooted. It grows; and eventually there's sturdiness, and fruit. if we were to imagine a tree. That also talks about a process. You have to be willing to learn, to be protected for a time. You can't handle everything that you want to handle immediately. You learn to trust the Lord, and maturity happens over time, not instantly.

What is always at the heart of delusion or false religion is the promise that you don't really have to learn to trust the Lord; your faith doesn't have to grow over time. You don't have to learn to deal with the flesh with all its memories and deceptions. You can leap from childhood to maturity overnight. You can instantly become everything that you want to be---a person of stature, authority, power, and winsomeness. Just take what's behind the door on the stage. Yet Paul is saying, "As you have received the Lord, learn to walk a day at a time, a step at a time. Grow in the Lord. We're in a process that's going to end in glory; we're sure of the hope that is before us. We have the intimacy of Christ with us right here every day; he is our companion everywhere we go. Our roots go down into what is really valuable soil, and the growth is taking place. Don't let the process be disrupted by the promise of something that in the long run will make you a slave and take everything away from you."

THE PROCESS OF DELUSION

In verse 8 Paul does not just indicate that we have enemies, but he gives us three insights as to how this deluding process or this taking captive works: "See to it that no one takes you captive through 1) philosophy and empty deception, 2) according to the tradition of men, 3) according to the elementary principles of the world..." First of all, you may encounter an intellectual challenge to your faith. We live in a highly intellectual community; most people here are well-educated. At some point in your life you have probably run up against the arguments that say in effect that anyone who takes faith seriously, apprehends what is invisible, or believes in a personal God is foolish.

For example, suppose you are a young Christian, and you know for sure that God has answered your prayers. Let's imagine that you're in a difficult, painful family relationship. You have prayed, "Lord, help me! I don't know what to do." And all of a sudden, you sense that God is alive and present, and attentive to your prayers. You begin to see things about the relationship that you didn't see before, changes are brought about, and the Lord gives life and answers your prayers just as you asked that it should be done. It is undeniable to you that he both heard and acted on what you requested of him, that he knows and loves you. And then you encounter someone who approaches life as a faithless intellectual, who says, "Oh yes, I once prayed and had a similar experience back in my immaturity. You'll outgrow it and get beyond it. All religions bring about an occasional emotional high. There is a scientific explanation for everything." Suddenly, there's a threat to your faith, what you know for sure really happened, because someone claims to know more and is bringing to bear a pseudo-intellectual challenge. But scripture says we are not to be taken captive by such empty deceptions.

The second thing Paul says is that there can be a traditional appeal to religion that would take away faith in Christ. "Don't be captivated ...according to the tradition of men," he says. This is a form of deception that is what Jesus encountered in his earthly ministry. For instance, Jesus told the man who had been healed to take up his mat, and the Jews objected, "No you can't take up your mat. It's the Sabbath. Who do you think you are? We have restrictions on this that we have always followed." Religion can exert tremendous influence just by being traditional. You know what it sounds like: "We don't have that sort of meeting." "We don't let people with haircuts like yours into our building." "We would never think of letting ordinary people pray; we have ministers who are supposed to pray." "We have professionals who do the baptizing." "You can't read your own Bible and come to your own conclusions, or call your friends together and let them read the Bible. The approach we take is to give you approval books that have been written on the Bible." "We don't have folks like that as part of our fellowship; they're not welcome." The mere fact that tradition has existed for generations exerts influence on us spiritually. It can sound weighty in the long run and thus it can deny Christ.

INVISIBLE POWERS

Thirdly, Paul refers to the elementary principles or the elemental spirits of the world. This is a strange and interesting word in Greek, *stoicheia*. Probably what Paul is referring to here is ancient, dark, and invisible powers. The ancient people believed that the world was made up of four elements---earth, wind, fire and water---and that these had powers that went beyond just their physical manifestation. They were somehow the elemental organizing principals of everything that is. The idea was that there were personalities and deep undergirdings to the earth and power that flowed in mysterious ways. This power often could be entered into only by some kind of dark, religious, and mysterious encounter with somebody who had special knowledge. The whole business of dealing with demons at times and with fairy stories at other times made people vulnerable; they had a longing to know, to be in touch with sources of mysterious power. That too can be a phony religion.

People will often appear to know things about the invisible world, to have authority to overturn what can be seen, to bring about change. We can recognize what Paul is warning against here in much of our culture today: chants, goddesses, harmonic convergence's, horoscopes, voodoo, the jargon of the new age, the jargon of the self-help movement, gurus like Sun Myung Moon and others who claim to have been tapped by something mysterious and distant. The Mormons are an example with their angels, magic glasses, and hidden documents hearkening back to some sort of ancient civilization that never existed.

We need to listen carefully whenever anyone is claiming power to influence the world or to bring about changes, who does not give first and complete honor to Christ. There are even some in Christian communities who meet in small societies and in effect sell special secrets for doing spiritual warfare of various kinds. They are not enthusiastic that the Lord be given honor, but that the thrill of the hunt is on as they battle the darkness. They have that same psychology that Paul is warning against here.

All of these things---intellectualism, tradition, and the elemental spirits---can be alternatives to Jesus Christ. They can be ways of attracting us to shortcuts that are different from faith in Christ and the maturity that comes over time spent walking with him.

THE GREATNESS OF CHRIST

What does Paul suggest, then? He is saying beware of those who would take you captive, delude you, use you, in the long run enslave you, promise you what is not possible, misrepresent the world, fascinate you, and destroy you. But does Paul then give their teaching in detail to help us combat these deceptions? No, he goes back and talks about Christ. The answer is Jesus! It is when we are certain of his greatness, overtaken by his magnificence, more deeply in love with him, that we are best defended against any alternative. Verses 9-10:

For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority....

In him God has come and joined the human race. There is no other answer. In him you have partaken of this fullness, you have been made complete, and you have been given everything you need. He is the head over all rule and authority. These are great reminders of what he has already taught in chapter 1 about who Jesus Christ is. Verses 11-15:

...and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

UNION WITH CHRIST

That is a wonderful encapsulation not only of who Christ is but what he has done and what happens to us. We are with him on the cross; we are baptized into his death, burial and resurrection. We have a circumcision made without hands on our hearts, not just outwardly or physically. We rejoice with him, overthrowing the power of principalities and everything arrayed against him. That is who we are in Christ.

I want to briefly identify three ideas in verses 11 through 15. It says first of all that our flesh has been removed. "In him you were circumcised...without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ...." Now, Paul is not using the term flesh to talk about ordinary bones, blood, and tissue of various kinds that make up our bodies. He is using it for the principle of rebellion into which we were born. Further, we were not only antagonistic to God but destructive to ourselves. And over the course of our lifetime our flesh will take a particular form in us such that there is a kind of rebellion to which we are most prone. We are going to be proud, perhaps in a subtle way; or damaged and frightened, either subtly or very overtly and terribly. We are going to have a series of weaknesses by which our rebellion against God has a particular ability to ruin us and distance us from him.

A fundamental change took place at our conversion, and we are no longer owned by our flesh. Our flesh will still continue to exert its power and influence---tempt us, shout at us, persuade us if it can---but it is external to us now, not who we are in our heart of hearts. The spirit of God is now resident within us, and at our deepest level we are joined to the Lord, not in rebellion against him. It is great news to discover that we are not what our feelings sometimes declare.

Secondly, he says that we are forgiven. The reference to baptism here is primarily associated with the fact that there were decrees against us once, guilt in which we lived. We did in fact offend the God of the universe. We have done things of which we are and ought to be ashamed; we are guilty as charged. And yet we are forgiven because of what has taken place on the cross. No one may ever again bring up a charge against his elect. It is no longer held against us; we are no longer guilty of anything we have ever done.

The third thing Paul does is remind us that Christ has triumphed over every alternative, every antagonist against him. In verse 15 he says that no one will ever change the rules. The day will never come when somebody will say, "That worked for a time, but now Jesus is subordinate, set aside, and some other lord is in place." The war was fought on the cross and it was won by Christ. We are in him, and we are new creatures, forgiven and alive. His gift to us is unchangeable; it can't be taken away.

NO OTHER VOICE

Therefore, in verse 16, Paul says we are not to let anybody else act as our judge or restrict our lives. There are time references here: Sabbaths, new moon festivals, and so on. Paul means we are not to let anyone tell us what to do, make us jump to their tune, make us show up at their command. I think many of us have let our work environment take the role described here. It's almost a religious role. We have to do what we're told

when we're told. And there are any number of other ways in which our lives can be owned in the way we spend our time or in the things we do--what we may or may not eat or touch, where we may or may not go. The voice of these powerful restrictions grows tighter and tighter. Instead of being free servants of God living in his world, obeying his call, joyfully interacting with all that he has made, loving his people, going where he sends us, and afraid of nothing, we live lives that become more and more restricted, more frightened, and more crushed. We don't have to live that kind of restricted life. We are children of God. We are to be who he has called us to be.

Paul is clear and authoritative in his reminder that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and that we must not set aside our life in Christ. This life is growth over time. It is learning to trust him, walk in him, and know him. We have his companionship at every point, his reminding us of what is true, his applying the truth to our lives. We must not set aside all the business of Christian growth in order to have what is behind the door on the stage, which claims advantages that are short-lived and that result in slavery.

I invite you now to ask yourself whether something is attempting to take the place of Christ at the deepest level of your life; whether something else would make you obey it; perhaps frighten you into serving it; or claim advantages that are more quickly available to you than learning to walk in love, pray, and follow Jesus. If there are captivating, deluding influences or voices that have reduced the joy of your Christian life, then I invite you to face them, deny them, draw near to the Lord, and give him back first place in your life.

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