

# Complete in Christ and Captive to Empty Deception

*Steve Cable examines four types of cultural captivity that holds Christians in bondage: naturalism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism.*

## Problem of Captivity

God has laid a powerful vision on Probe Ministries, calling us to free the minds of fifty million culturally captive Christians and build them into confident ambassadors for Christ by the year 2020. Our survey analysis has shown that cultural captivity is a growing problem within the church.[{1}](#) To be effective in this mission, we need to understand the different forms cultural captivity can take individually and collectively.

Does the Bible provide any insight into cultural captivity and the tools for setting believers free? In an [earlier article](#), we looked at the differing types of cultural captivity: carnal, confused, compromised, and contented Christians.[{2}](#) In this article we will see insights from the second chapter of Colossians.

In Colossians 2:8, Paul warns the local Christians, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception,” and then he reminds them that they are “complete in [Christ].”[{3}](#) What does this thing look like that can capture someone who is complete in Christ? How can I avoid it or free myself from it in the power of Christ? Surely, the Christians in Colossae were asking the same things. Paul thought as much for he points out four different views that may take genuine Christians captive and keep them from doing their part in the war of ideas.

In Colossians 2:1-4, Paul warns us that we need a true knowledge of “Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” If we don’t completely understand the fullness of Christ and His work of redemption, we are setting ourselves up for those who would “delude you with persuasive arguments.”<sup>{4}</sup> We must fully grasp that Christ alone is necessary and sufficient for our salvation. We must believe it in the day to day living of our lives—being “rooted and grounded in Him.”<sup>{5}</sup>

In the remainder of the second chapter of Colossians, Paul lists four specific ways that our thinking can be taken captive by the philosophy of men through persuasive arguments. It is important to remember that these arguments are called “persuasive,” meaning that they appear to make good sense and have the power to sway our thinking. It is only by examining these arguments in the light of Christ’s truth that their falsehood comes to light. I want to examine each of the four, considering how they would appear to the Colossian Christians of that day and how they might play out in this decade.

The examples of cultural captivity exposed by Paul and still relevant to our lives today are naturalism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism. We’ll begin with naturalism.

## **Naturalism: Captive to Scientific Deception**

The first type of cultural captivity highlighted in Colossians is found in our key verse, chapter 2 verse 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.

This verse has the only occurrence of the word “philosophy” in

the Bible. The Greek word literally means “the investigation of truth and nature”[\[6\]](#) as emphasized by the remainder of this verse. Thinking in accordance with the tradition of men and the elementary principles of the world can captivate us. The ways in which man explains how the world works and how we fit into it can be a deceptive trap.

In Galatians 4:3, Paul tells us that apart from Christ we are held in bondage by the elementary principles of the world. When we try to limit the forces at work in our universe to simply those elementary forces operating in our daily lives, we are missing out on the powerful work of Christ in our world far above and beyond the everyday forces of nature.

So what are the elementary principles that lure us into captivity today? Certainly, one of the most influential is neo-Darwinism. As discussed in many articles at Probe.org, neo-Darwinism says the world is the result of the strictly natural processes of random mutations and natural selection. This theory attempting to describe the current diversity and complexity of life on this earth is the dominant view in our society. It is seen by many as the culmination of understanding our existence in this world. In fact, it is full of problems, having no plausible explanation for 1) the existence of a life-supporting planet, 2) the first occurrence of life on this planet, or 3) the irreducible complexity of life forms on this planet.

I would suggest that those Christians who put Christ’s role in our creation at a level below that of these elementary principles are allowing themselves to be taken captive. If one believes these principles are lord over Christ instead of the other way around, that person is living practically as a citizen of this earth rather than as a citizen of heaven.

## Legalism: Captive to Self-Made Godliness

A second form of cultural captivity, identified in the letter to the Colossians, is legalism. Paul writes:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Col 2:16-17).

Paul was warning against those attempting to take Christians captive through the subtle lies of legalism, telling the new, Gentile followers that believing in Christ was a good start, *but* you also need to follow some of the laws of Moses if you are to be righteous before God.

Notice that the items listed in this verse are not instructions on purity and righteous behavior. Rather, they are specific practices given to Israel as precursors of the coming Messiah. For example, the festival of Passover is a marvelous foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice of Himself as the Lamb of God to deliver us from slavery to the world of sin and separation from God. But, why celebrate the Passover when one can celebrate the real event? These behaviors designed to prepare us for the coming of Christ are no longer necessary now that we have the presence of Christ in our lives.

In the American culture, legalism appears to have been more prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than it is today. But there are certainly forms of legalism which take people captive today. If you are more interested in passing laws to make some form of Christian behavior the law of the land than you are in changing the hearts of men through the gospel of Jesus Christ, you may be captive to legalistic thinking.

Another form of legalism is the practice of picking only parts of the truth as applicable to you. Jesus noted in Matthew

15:3-6 that this type of legalism was present in the Pharisaical view of committing their resources to God so that they would not have to help their mothers and fathers. Today, I can customize my religious beliefs to conform to what I expect from my religion rather than what my religion sets as a standard for my life. The National Survey of Youth and Religion tells us that over fifty-one percent of 18- to 23-year-olds in American say "it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole."[\[7\]](#)

## **Mysticism: Captive to Man's Composite View of God**

Earlier, we saw naturalism and legalism as two forms of cultural captivity for Christians. Now we will consider another form which can take us captive, mysticism. In Colossians 2:18-19, Paul writes:

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

Here Paul is describing someone who drifts away by delighting in self-derived sources of truth, that is, "visions he has seen," and other religious practices not taught by Christ. This person delights in mixing together teachings from different religions to come up with one's own personalized religious experience. But Christ calls us to worship the Father and the Son, not angels or our own self sacrifice.

Your first reaction may be that this is not a major area of captivity for today's Christians. However, when we begin to consider examples of this type of thinking, we realize that it

is very prevalent in our society.

For example, consider the millions of people who joined Oprah Winfrey in extolling and following the teachings of Eckhardt Tolle, author of *A New Earth, Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. Tolle teaches a version of Eastern mysticism which he discovered in a vision. Taking his stand on visions, he teaches we are all part of the universal life force to which we should desire to return. He selectively misquotes Jesus throughout the book, identifying Him as one of the early proponents of this mystic religion. Most of Tolle's followers come from Christian backgrounds, professing to be Christians trying to find a way to integrate his teaching with the teachings of Jesus.

One feature of Tolle's teaching is the view that Jesus was one of many who are bringing a form of truth to us. He believes Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed are all trying to communicate the same truth in different ways. This viewpoint is seen in the National Study of Youth and Religion where over seventy percent of American 18- to 23-year-olds disagreed with the idea that only one religion was true. In our study of American born-again between 18 and 40, we found that less than half of these born-again believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven, not Mohammed or Buddha.

## **Asceticism: Captive to Focusing on the Flesh**

A fourth form of cultural captivity identified in Colossians is asceticism. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines asceticism as "the doctrine that a life of extreme self-denial and austerity releases the soul from bondage with the body and permits union with the divine." Asceticism was promoted in Jesus' time by the Essenes of the Jewish culture and the Stoics of the Greek culture.

Since our hope is rooted in an imperishable life in heaven, one could adopt the view that this earthly body needs to be denied in light of our heavenly home. However, Paul warns us:

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!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence (Col 2:20-23).

Paul warns the Christians at Colossae not to fall for the idea that we must remove our body from all pleasures of the world to partake of the divine. He points out that obsession with self-abasement and severe treatment of the body actually focus our attention on the flesh. Thus, our focus is on eliminating fleshly indulgence rather than on living lives that please Jesus.

In our post-modern American culture, severe treatment of the body does not appear to be attractive to most young adults (except for extreme cases such as anorexia). Perhaps, though, it is evidenced by some forms of the "buy green" movement. What we do see is the opposite extreme, where an emphasis on bodily enhancement for the here and now takes our focus off the work of Christ. Of course, in other parts of the world such as South America, extreme asceticism is practiced among some believers.

We have seen four types of false thinking that could take Christians captive in Colossae of the first century and can in America today. The four types are naturalism, legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. If we recognize these forms of captivity, as Christians, we can be free of them. We must ask ourselves, Does this way of thinking add anything to the

fullness of Christ? If I am already “complete in Him”,<sup>{8}</sup> how can these add-ons make me more complete? Obviously they cannot. So leave them behind and “as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord so walk in Him.”<sup>{9}</sup>

## Notes

1. Steve Cable, [“Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America,”](#); [“Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths,”](#) ; [“The True State of American Evangelicals in 2011,”](#)  
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2. Cable, “Examining Our Cultural Captivity,”  
[www.probe.org/examining-our-cultural-captivity/](http://www.probe.org/examining-our-cultural-captivity/).
3. Colossians 2:10
4. Colossians 2:4
5. Colossians 2:7
6. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.
7. [www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp). “The National Study of Youth and Religion,”  
[www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org), whose data were used by permission here, was generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., under the direction of Christian Smith of the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame.
8. Colossians 2:10
9. Colossians 2:6

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