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."{4} 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."{5}

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-agains between 18 and 40, we found that less than half of these born-agains 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",{8} 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."{9}

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," .
2. Cable, "Examining Our Cultural Captivity," 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. "The National Study of Youth and Religion," 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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Bringing the Truth of Christ to Your Generation

Are you a believer wondering if you're part of a dwindling population? Do people who follow hard after Christ—and show it

by their actions and attitudes—seem to be a vanishing breed? Do you get the feeling that we're living in a post—Christian culture? We're not announcing the end of the Church in America and the West, but there is much cause for concern. We have the evidence straight from the mouths of believers—many of them caught up in captivity to the culture.

Here at Probe, we have been analyzing both existing and new original survey data to obtain a better grip on the realities of born-again faith in America today. Although the evangelical church has remained fairly constant in size as a percentage of our population over the last twenty years, these surveys show its impact on our society has continued to decline as the percentage of non—Christians has grown considerably over the same period. We see two reasons for this change:

> *1. The increased acceptance of pluralism removes the felt need to share our faith with others. In our new Barna survey, almost one half of all born-again 18- to 40-year-olds believe that Jesus is one way to eternal life, but Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. when followed well, will also result in eternal life.*
>
> *2. Captivity to the culture rather than to Christ's truth shapes believers' perspectives on nearly every aspect of life. The recent National Study of Youth & Religion, a survey of 18- to 23-year-olds, shows that only a quarter of those affiliated with an evangelical church have a consistent set of biblical theological beliefs and that less than 2% of them combine those theological beliefs with a consistent set of biblical beliefs on behaviors and attitudes.*

A combination of pluralism and cultural captivity eliminates both the reason for and the evidence of changed lives needed to effectively share the great news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, these problems are not unique to our time and country. In fact, these problems were key issues addressed in

the letters of Peter, John and Paul back in the first century. In this article, we will use the writings of Peter to introduce Paul's response to this problem as laid out in the book of Colossians with special emphasis on Col. 4:2-6.

As advocates of apologetics and a biblical worldview, we often focus on 1 Peter 3:15, which exhorts us to always be ready to give a defense for the hope of the gospel to anyone who asks. However, Peter points out that our testimony for Christ, goes far beyond our ability to make a reasoned defense. In the first chapter of his letter, Peter provides an excellent description of the hope of the gospel. He makes it clear that only through the resurrection of Christ can we can receive eternal life. He then goes on to describe the ways that we are called to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light." Specifically, we are told to proclaim Christ through:

- *our excellent behavior (1 Peter 2:11-17),*
- *our right relationships with others (1 Peter 2:18–3:14),*
- *a verbal explanation of why we believe the good news (1 Peter 3:15-16), and*
- *sound judgment for the purpose of prayer (1 Peter 4:7)*

As our behavior and relationships cause observers to ask us to fully explain the hope that is driving these actions, we have the opportunity to speak the truth to them with words empowered by prayer (1 Peter 3:15-16). So Peter makes it clear that pluralism and cultural captivity are counter to the message of the gospel as portrayed in the lives of genuine believers.

Given this message from Peter, let's take a more in–depth look at how Paul addresses this topic in his letter to the Colossians. In the first two chapters, Paul gives an in–depth

description of what the gospel is and what it is not. In the New American Standard version, the reader is told to "set your mind on the things above" where we are living with Christ. Because we are residents of heaven, we need to consider our life on earth from that eternal perspective. From this point on in the letter, Paul lays out the same four instructions as Peter laid out on how we are to share Christ in this world.

In Colossians 3:5–17, we are given the standard for excellent behavior that our *new self* is being renewed to live in accordance with. As Paul makes clear in the first two chapters, this excellent behavior is not a qualification for heaven; after all, according to Colossians 2:9, the audience of believers is already "complete in Christ." Rather, the purpose of our excellent behavior is so the world can get a savory taste of heavenly living.

Then, in Colossians 3:18–4:1, Paul instructs us on the importance of **good relationships** in our families and at work. It is through our good relationships that the world can see the true meaning of "love your neighbor as you love yourself." As Paul points out, in all of these relationships "it is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

Paul then points to the remaining aspects of fully proclaiming Christ: through **our prayers** and **our words**. He addresses our prayer life as follows:

> *Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak (Col. 4:2-4).*

First, we are to devote ourselves to **prayer**, making it a strong player in ordering our lives. I think that "keeping alert in it" gives us the idea that we are to be ready to take

something to prayer at any time during our busy daily schedule. Prayer is not to be strictly relegated to a set prayer time, but rather a real–time, always–on communication with God in response to the interactions and challenges of our day. Paul also indicates we should not be praying as a rote habit, but rather with an attitude of thanksgiving, knowing that God hears and responds to our prayers.

Secondly, Paul gives us a consistent topic for our **prayers**: that God would open up a door for the word in the lives of those who need to hear. We may live a life characterized by excellent behavior and good relationships. But, if we are not praying that God will use our lives to open up a door for the gospel, then we are short–circuiting the purpose of God in our lives. Let me say it directly to you: If you are not seeing doors opening for the word through your life, perhaps you should ask, "What am I praying for? Am I praying that God will open up opportunities for me to share Christ with others?"

Note that in the first chapter of Colossians, Paul explains the mystery of Christ we are to "speak forth" saying,

> *. . .That I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the **mystery** which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory**" (Col. 1:25-27).*

We are praying for an open door to speak forth so that everyone can receive the promise of eternal glory through receiving Christ in their lives. In other words, we need to actively ask God to give us entrée into others' lives to communicate the gospel so they can receive the riches of eternal life along with us. Do we really want this? It's a prayer God is sure to answer. If so, we're living according to a biblical worldview in one more essential way. If not, we

risk the loss of succeeding generations.

Finally, Paul addresses the importance of our **words** in fulfilling our purpose as followers of Christ:

> *Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person (Col. 4:5-6).*

We need to be wise in our relationships with those who don't know Christ. The verse literally says we are to redeem the time spent with unbelievers. As followers of Christ, we have the privilege of taking the most temporal and earth–bound thing in the world, time, and converting it into something of eternal value through our behavior, our relationships, our prayers and the words we speak.

We are to make the most of each opportunity to season our speech with the grace of Christ. If our speech is regularly salted with references to God's grace in our lives, we can tell from someone's reaction how we should respond to them. If we are not looking for it, how can we know when God answers our prayers to provide an open door for the gospel? And why would we be praying for it unless we value what God is saying to us here?

In summary, we must make clear to upcoming generations of evangelicals that we have a consistent message from Christ and His apostles on these two points:

> *1. Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God and the only possible way to eternal life. Religious pluralism just doesn't work.*
>
> *2. We are called to live distinctly different lives–as captives of Christ not our culture–in our behavior, relationships, prayers and speech. Why? In order to be*

representatives of the good news of Jesus Christ in a world that desperately needs Him.

If we choose to live our lives as if these statements are untrue, we have allowed ourselves to be deceived by the persuasive arguments of the world. Let’s make the choice not to be taken captive and, instead, be bold and caring in proclaiming the truth for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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