Heresy: Nothing New Under the Sun

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of some ancient Christian heresies that are still being embraced today: legalism, gnosticism, mysticism, and marcionism.

In this article we address ancient heresies that still exist in only a slightly different form today. Jesus warned us in Matthew 13:24-25 that the "kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field." But then there is a twist in the story.

> "But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also."



Later Jesus explained the parable. The wheat is the "people of the kingdom." The tares are the "people of the evil one." The illustration would make sense to people living in the first century. There was even a Roman law against sowing tares in another person's field. Some have called it a "primitive form of bioterrorism."

Jesus is teaching that both true Christians and false Christians will live together. They both may even go to church and seem like Christians. But the false Christians believe and spread heresy within the church and into society.

Paul also warned about false teaching and heresy. In what might have been his last epistle, he warned Timothy that: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn

aside to myths." (2 Timothy 4:3)

Peter also gave a warning that these false teachers will come from inside the church. "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words." (2 Peter 2:1)

Notice that these heresies and false teachers will arise from among you. They will secretly introduce these heresies. And they will use greed and sensuality to seduce Christians. Jude (1:4) also adds that these false teachers "have crept in unnoticed" and "turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."

In this article we look at heresies in the past that can be found in a slightly altered form today. Just as believers in the first century were warned about false teachers and destructive heresies, so we need to warn each other today about these heresies in the 21st century.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 reminds us that there is "nothing new under the sun." As we will see below, that is true of these ancient heresies.

Legalism

Legalism is an ancient heresy going all the way back to the first century. Paul in his letter to the Colossians (2:16-17) said, "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." He warned them about those in their midst who were taking them captive through the

subtle lies of legalism.

You might notice that what is listed in these verses are not instructions on purity or righteousness. Rather they are specific Old Testament practices that were given to Israel before the coming of Christ. The Passover is a foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice as the Lamb of God. While the deliverance of Israel is significant, consider how much more significant is Christ's death which provides us with deliverance from the slavery of sin and separation from God. The previous feasts and festivals are no longer necessary now that we have Christ in our lives.

Jesus addressed legalism among the Pharisees and scribes. They established all sorts of rules and regulations that were binding on all Jews. Starting with the law, they set out to compile the various oral traditions and even began to develop interpretations of these laws. In the end, they even had interpretations of the interpretations that were collected in numerous volumes.

By the time of Christ, the Pharisees and the scribes were actually following the traditions of men rather than the law of God. Jesus pointedly asked them, "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:3) Jesus also condemned the Pharisees by saying, "You also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:28). Jesus therefore accused them, on numerous occasions, of being hypocrites.

Legalism is our attempt to produce righteousness apart from God. We are challenged to follow additional rules and regulations that we believe will merit favor before God. But in the end, these unbiblical rules bind us and drain the joy from our lives.

When we give people an ever expanding "to-do list" that is uncoupled from God's power, we wear people down and ultimately

drive people away from the gospel. Paul warned Timothy that in the last days there would be people “having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5). He counsels him to avoid such people.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism is an ancient heresy that surfaced in the last century, partially because of the discovery of the Gnostic Gospels. The Gnostics were prevalent in the first few centuries after the time of Christ. The word *gnosis* means “knowledge.” The focus was on hidden knowledge that contradicted biblical revelation.

For example, the Gnostics denied the existence of sin. Instead, they proposed that the world was corrupted by the demiurge who created it and rules over it. If they believed in sin, they would say that the only sin is ignorance.

The Gnostics taught that Jesus came not to save the world but to impart special knowledge that would lead us to what they called a “divine pleroma.” If you were fortunately to find this knowledge, then you would achieve salvation.

In the first centuries, the Gnostics presented themselves as Christians and worked to popularize their ideas among the growing church of believers. They also produced their own texts (Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Judas).

Iraenaeus was a church father who wrote a critique of Gnosticism in AD 180. He explained that the Gnostics used the Bible alongside their own texts to demonstrate their “perverse interpretations” and “deceitful expositions.” They also reinterpreted parables and allegories from the Old Testament in a fraudulent manner.

Nevertheless, Gnosticism appealed to many Christians in the first centuries because it had many elements that were very similar to Christianity. They believed in Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit. They quoted from the Bible. They practiced some of the sacraments.

Many of these same heretical ideas appeal to Christians today. Leaders of progressive Christianity argue that they have a more mature view of God and the Bible. These leaders believe they have special knowledge that allows them to set aside the standard interpretations of biblical passages. One evangelical pastor said: "The church will continue to be even more irrelevant when it quotes letters from 2,000 years ago as their best defense."{1}

The Gnostics and modern heretics claim sources of knowledge outside the Bible. They say we know so much more now that the early Christians. C.S. Lewis refers to this as "chronological snobbery." They assume they know better than any believer in the past.

Today, we have people claiming to know what the Bible really means and invite you to join them as they impart their "special knowledge" to you. More than ever we should be alert to such leaders who will ultimately lead us away from the true Gospel.

Mysticism

Mysticism is another ancient heresy that we still see today. When Paul wrote to the Colossians (2:18-19), he warned them about false teachers who would attempt to seduce them into mystical ideas: "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."

The word mysticism comes from the Greek word (*mystes*) for the

mystery religions that existed at the time Paul was writing to these Christians. He is describing someone who is “taking his stand on visions he has seen.” In other words, this is a person who has had some vision and is mixing that vision with the revelation of Scripture.

At the time Paul was writing to a church that was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Many were young Christians and may have brought their pagan ideas into the church. This would include the idea that you receive spiritual revelations by entering into an ecstatic state. These Christians also lived in a culture where many claimed they were receiving visions from the gods. If these young Christians did not have discernment, they might actually believe that someone who has these visions was spiritually superior to them.

Mysticism has been a major area of cultural captivity both in church history and even in our present day. We see in Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, that believers were confused about speaking in tongues and other spiritual manifestations. Some of the believers were essentially “babes in Christ” who could not handle the solid food of God’s word. He reminded them that when they were pagans, they had been led astray (1 Corinthians 12:1-3). Because of their previous exposure to paganism, they were vulnerable to false doctrine.

Throughout church history, certain churches and denominations have brought mystical rituals and practices into their worship experience. They may take the form of chants, icons, or prescribed practices not found in Scripture but part of a tradition that borrows heavily from mystical ideas. And many of these practices are found today not only in North American churches but in churches in other parts of the world.

Mysticism is quite prevalent outside of the church and can have a strong cultural influence on Christians. Many of the books on the best-seller lists over the last few decades dealing with spirituality are not books that promote biblical

Christianity but rather books that promote an Eastern philosophy of religion or the New Age Movement.

Marcionism

Marcionism was taught by a theologian named Marcion in the second century. Although some of his ideas parallel Gnosticism, he made a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. He taught that the benevolent God of the gospels who sent Jesus was inconsistent with the mean, vindictive, malevolent God of the Old Testament. Hence, he concluded they were two different deities.

He also considered himself a follower of Paul, who he preached was the only true apostle of Jesus Christ. In fact, he even created his own "Scriptures" that included ten of Paul's epistles and the Gospel of Marcion (which was a shorter version and highly edited version of the Gospel of Luke). He emphasized Paul because he felt he freed Christianity from the Jewish Scriptures.

He also rejected most of the orthodox teachings of Christianity. For example, he rejected the ideas of God's wrath and rejected the ideas of hell and judgment. Those ideas, according to him, were tied to the God of the Old Testament, whom he called the Demiurge. That God was merely a jealous tribal deity of the Jews and represented a legalistic view of justice.

A similar idea exists even today. For example, one evangelical theologian said this: "The Bible is an ancient book and we shouldn't be surprised to see it act like one. So seeing God portrayed as a violent, tribal warrior is not how God is but how he was understood to be by the ancient Israelites community with god in their time and place."{2}

We might add that an increasing number of pastors and

Christians no longer want to talk about God's wrath and refuse to teach what the Bible does say about hell and judgment. Books and articles are being written denying the existence of hell. Instead, they teach universal salvation for all.

Jesus talked more about hell than he talked about heaven. In Luke 16 he describes it as a great chasm that does not allow people to cross to the other side. In Matthew 25 he predicts a future in which people will be separated into two groups. One will enter heaven. The others will be banished to "eternal fire."

We live in a world where heresy, false teaching, and a false gospel are proliferating. That is why we need to develop biblical discernment. Paul said he was amazed that some of the early Christians adopted "a different gospel" which he said was a distorted gospel of Christ. He added, "If we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed" (Galatians 1:6-8).

These ancient heresies are being preached today. We need to return to the essential gospel and sound biblical teaching.

Notes

1. "Rob Bell Suggests Bible Not Relevant to Today's Culture | CBN News," www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2015/February/Rob-Bell-Suggests-Bible-Not-Relevant-to-Todays-Culture accessed 2/5/2023.
2. Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (NY: Harper One, 2014).

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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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