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IS COLOSSIANS 2:8 A WARNING AGAINST PHILOSOPHY?

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I teach at a Christian university that has a strong emphasis on defending the faith. Our commitment to missions, evangelism, and engaging a postmodern world necessarily entails training students in philosophy at a fairly high academic level. Our philosophy department, in fact, was recently featured in a major evangelical magazine as leading the way in effectively equipping students to make an impact in the fields of apologetics and philosophy.

Not everyone has a favorable stance on philosophy, however. I recently had a student in my office, for example, who belongs to an evangelical denomination that frowns on higher education in general and philosophy in particular. This student related to me his sincere desire to reach his Gen-X peers with the gospel, and he recognizes that he needs to understand the philosophical underpinnings of their worldview to do so, but his own church has virtually disowned him as a result of his educational choices. Their warning to him, citing Paul's admonition in Colossians 2:8, was, "Beware of philosophy!"

While I was a doctoral student at the University of Oxford, I maintained a lively dialogue with a local pastor who had come to the conclusion that conscious, eternal punishment is not taught in Scripture, but is the result of the early church adopting the Greek philosophical notion of the eternality of the soul. The human soul, he argued, is not eternal by design, but may be granted eternality by a gracious God when lost people respond positively to His offer of eternal life in Jesus Christ. In his view, Greek philosophy has so influenced and corrupted Christian thinking that it has left us with, as he put it, "the unnecessary problem of hell."

In a similar manner, Mormons, who believe that God has a physical body, reject the orthodox position that God is an incorporeal (i.e., nonphysical) being as an unfortunate early intrusion of Plato's philosophy that the soul is more "real" than the body. Barry Bickmore, a Mormon apologist, believes this idea was introduced to the church by Greek converts to Christianity as a means of making Christianity more palatable to the Hellenistic (i.e., Greek) world: "The temptation is always there to make one's faith more popular by 'modernizing' it, but the Apostle Paul had warned against exactly this kind of thing: 'Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit' (Col. 2:8)."¹

Christians and Philosophy. Christians, historically, have been unsure of what to do with philosophy. Some have followed the church father Tertullian in demanding, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?"² Most Christian thinkers, however, have followed Thomas Aquinas and seen philosophy as a useful "handmaiden to theology."³ A correct understanding of Paul's warning to the Colossians regarding "philosophy and vain deceit" is, of course, crucial to this discussion, and is especially relevant to those of us involved in defending the faith before its skeptics, be they in the halls of higher education or the pews of the Latter-day Saints assembly.

In order to answer the question of whether Paul's warning in Colossians was against philosophy *itself* or only some deviant imitation, we of course should examine the specific context of the verse, but we also should consider the larger context of Paul's life and letters. Understanding the particular historical context of Paul's New Testament letters often is key to understanding some specific statement he makes in them.

Paul and Philosophy. Those who are familiar with first-century Hellenistic philosophy often observe that Paul as well seems to have been highly familiar with it. His lists of hardships (e.g., 2 Cor. 6:4-10) and his

dialogical form of argumentation (especially in Romans) reveal that he knew the themes of its discourse. His use of concepts such as “inner man” (Rom. 7:22; 2 Cor. 4:16) and “self-sufficiency” (2 Cor. 9:8; Phil. 4:11), along with his fondness for body imagery (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12) reveal that he also knew the terminology of its discourse well and was comfortable using it. In his address to the intellectuals in Athens, for example, Paul actually cites the Stoic philosopher Aratus (Acts 17:28).⁴ This was certainly of some persuasive value to his audience.

The similarities between Paul’s letters and the writings of the great Stoic philosopher Seneca convinced many in the early church, in fact, that Seneca must have been a convert to Christianity and a disciple of Paul. This belief gave rise to a series of spurious letters between Paul and Seneca, which many early Christians regarded as genuine. No wonder that one Pauline scholar remarks, “Paul’s practice of deliberately using Stoic themes in redefined ways is an early Christian attempt at crosscultural communication.”⁵

What is important to note is that in the larger historical context of Paul’s letters and preaching there does not seem to be a necessary contradiction or conflict between the gospel and philosophy itself. Paul seems, rather, to acknowledge philosophical concepts and language and to use them to further the gospel.

The Colossian Heresy. Looking now at Colossians and the specific context of chapter 2, we find Paul addressing a local assembly that had been infiltrated by a form of false teaching that threatened to undermine the gospel he preached. Paul does not give us enough information to identify precisely what sect or “philosophy” he is describing. There are some clues, however, that suggest that it was perhaps a syncretistic hybrid of Jewish mystical practices and popular pagan folk-belief: he mentions the observance of special days, including the Sabbath (v. 16); visionary experience and the worship of angels (v. 18); submission to the “elemental spirits of the world” (v. 20);⁶ and abstinence (vv. 21, 23). Paul clearly is attacking a peculiar form of religious speculation, but it is impossible to identify it with any of the major schools of philosophy known to us from the Greco-Roman world. In fact, it is important to keep in mind that the Greek word *philosophia* (and its Latin cognate) had a variety of meanings in this period, and, depending on the context, might be translated “religion,” “speculation,” or “investigation.”

Further light is shed on this false teaching by considering Paul’s description of it in verse 8: it is based on “human traditions and the elemental powers of the world, and not on Christ.” Probably the most important phrase in this list is the one that concludes, “[based] not on Christ.” Any philosophy or religious system that is not rooted in, governed by, and directed toward Christ is necessarily a false philosophy or religion. Paul’s primary target is “philosophical” speculation whose foundation is merely human wisdom.

The Jewish nature of this speculation is also emphasized by the phrase “human traditions,” which occurs elsewhere only in Mark 7:8, where Jesus condemns the Pharisees as those who reject “the commands of God and hold to human traditions” (cf. Gal. 1:14). Devotion to the “elemental spirits of the world” is how Paul similarly described the Galatians’ acceptance of Torah observance in Galatians 4:3, 9. That Paul could refer to this syncretistic Jewish speculation as a “philosophy” is in keeping with how Hellenistic Jews of the period sometimes referred to their faith. Jewish historian Flavius Josephus designates as “philosophies” Judaism⁷ and its various sects (the Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees)⁸ and the Jewish writer of 4 Maccabees refers to Judaism as “our philosophy...teaching temperance, self-control, courage” (5.22-23). The Jewish philosopher Philo Judaeus had no difficulty either in representing Judaism as a “philosophy,”⁹ and so it may well be that in Colossians 2:8 Paul uses the terminology of the false teachers he was countering. If so, we might accurately paraphrase the verse as follows: “See to it that no one takes you captive through this so-called ‘philosophy,’ which is hollow deceit, founded, as it is, on merely human traditions and the elementary powers of the world, and not on Christ.”

An Important Warning. Paul cannot be said to be rejecting the study of philosophy *per se* in Colossians 2:8, but even so this passage contains an important caution that Christians need to heed. There is often only a very fine line that separates true wisdom from false wisdom, and that line can easily be blurred by those whose motives are impure. Paul’s warning against the “wisdom of this world”

(1 Cor. 1:20) and his frank reminder, “knowledge puffs up” (1 Cor. 8:2) should serve to keep us mindful of the occupational hazards of rigorous and extended intellectual pursuits. Christians surely need to understand the arguments of their detractors and be ready to engage the world of ideas (as Paul did in Athens), yet we also need to be careful lest we take our eyes off the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

John (not his real name) was another student who sat in my office years ago and told me of his vocational aspiration to obtain a doctorate and teach theology at the university level. He was ambitious and especially wanted to gain admittance into what he called “a tier-one academic institution.” As is my custom in such situations, I encouraged John in his dreams, explained to him the kind of hurdles he would face, and warned him of the dangers of life in the academy. With John, however, my advice was more than routine vocational guidance. I sensed in John an unhealthy infatuation with academic advancement, which evidenced itself in a critical attitude toward other students and a bothersome need to be known as “the intellectual” in the classroom. John seemed more eager to be called a “doctor” than to be trained a servant of Christ in the academy.

John gained entrance into a prestigious school, but, sadly, virtually jettisoned his faith in the process. He has, I fear, forgotten “the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2-3) and has been deceived by “fine sounding arguments” (Col. 2:4 NIV).

— Moyer Hubbard

NOTES

1. Barry Bickmore, “Does God Have a Body in Human Form?” Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, <http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/GodHaveBody.pdf>.
2. Tertullian *Prescription against Heretics* 7.
3. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 1.Q.1.
4. Aratus *Phaenomena* 5.
5. Terrance Page, “Philosophy,” *The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 717.
6. Bible quotations are the author’s own translations from the Greek except where otherwise noted.
7. Flavius Josephus *Against Apion* 2.47.
8. Flavius Josephus *Antiquities* 18.11.
9. Philo Judaeus *Embassy* 156; *Dreams* 2.127; *Names* 223; *Contemplative Life* 26.