

Colossians 2:16-23. The ancient city of Colossae had its share of charlatans. Some claimed to have spoken with the divine or to have received visions. Others denied themselves food and shelter. In any case, much of this spirituality was fabricated. Paul encouraged the believers in this city to see through these people and keep walking with Christ. This is true spirituality.

He founded an entire genre of self-help literature, and you've likely never heard of him: Napoleon Hill (1883-1970). After several failed businesses and a string of illegal activities, he found his niche writing books. He claimed Andrew Carnegie, the great steel magnate, hired him to interview the richest men in America. Though the claim was a lie and all of the interviews fabricated, Hill's first book made him a millionaire.

From what I can tell about him, Hill was a gifted storyteller and full of charisma. He used his talents to produce countless stories that today would be dubbed as "fake news." He actually wrote hundreds of pages regarding his many meetings with Carnegie. He even said President Wilson called him into the Oval Office for advice on ending WWI. Later in life, Hill claimed to have written FDR's speeches during WWII.

Ironically, there's an air of humility about Hill. You want to believe him. He seems honest and likeable enough. Yet, he lied. By creating a successful image of himself, he paved the way for *Think and Grow Rich* (1937). The premise is that if you want to be rich, do what I did and think the right thoughts. Hill told his readers that since the world is governed by thought, they must visualize their desires. Visualize it, and your desires will become reality. Claiming this as the secret of his success, the book sold more than 20 million copies!

Visualize your desires. Think them into existence. Get what you want in life. Hill didn't invent any of this, but he was a charlatan. He came across these ideas, repackaged them, reinvented himself, and made a fortune in the process.

Paul warned the Colossians of men like this. He didn't say to weigh the good with the bad, but that there's nothing to see here. If you know Christ, realize you aren't the one lacking. You already have the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), which is something the Napoleon Hill's of this world are without. They can tell stories, but it's smoke and mirrors. Paul told the Colossians not to let these kinds of people look down upon them or lead them astray (v. 2:16, 18). You have Christ. Whatever men like this have to offer isn't more but less.

SPIRITUAL INTIMIDATION

A new kind of Christian was on the horizon in Asia Minor, one that thought well of Jesus, though not Jesus alone. Ideas from the East mixed with those of the West in this region. It was fashionable to take a little from each. Believe whatever you want, they might say, just don't go around saying everyone else is wrong. And that's one offense of Christianity, that without Christ you're walking the wrong path in life.

The Colossian church wasn't tempted to reject Jesus. The temptation was to look for something beyond Him, to tweak the Christian faith. Believers had to wrestle with the same questions as many today: Is Jesus the *only* way to God or might there be other ways to Him? Spiritual gurus in the area told of other ways and testified "in detail about visions" and mystical encounters as proof. They claimed to have had special revelations and said the path to true spirituality lay in a list of rules (v. 2:16, 18, 21).

"ERROR NEVER SHOWS ITSELF IN ITS NAKED REALITY IN ORDER NOT TO BE DISCOVERED. RATHER, IT DRESSES ELEGANTLY... TO MAKE IT APPEAR TO THE UNWARY MORE TRUE THAN TRUTH ITSELF"

— IRENAEUS.

The believers in Colossae had never seen anything paranormal, heard a voice, or received a vision. However, teachers in the area said they had. Paul said they boasted of their visions and ascetic way of life to give an air of spiritual authority. The Colossians received the Word through an ordinary experience, by Epaphras teaching it to them. These men claimed to receive visions and revelations, extraordinary experiences. It caused the Colossians with their simple faith in Jesus to feel small and to wonder if maybe there's something more.

Paul said questions of "food and drink" arose along with discussions of holy days (v. 2:16). Some said to submit to the Old Testament Law, to observe the feasts, to sacrifice on the first of the month with a new moon—rules, rituals, regalia. They said not to handle or touch certain items, not to even taste some things (v. 2:21). It all looked so spiritual.

Again, it's not that these men said to reject Jesus. They likely thought Jesus was fine. However, if you *really* want to be spiritual, you'll need a bit more than believing in Him. Some said to abstain from marriage (1 Tim 4:3). It's fine to diet or to remain unmarried (Paul wasn't

When More is Less

married), but don't think any of this proves you're a super spiritual person. It doesn't. Sadly, the Christians who received this letter from Paul were impressed by people like this. Sometimes, so are we.

Paul saw the spiritual gurus in the area as spiritual intimidators who were "puffed up without reason" (v. 2:18). His advice? "Let no one pass judgment on you" in regard to any of these things (v. 2:16). Don't be impressed. Don't be intimidated. Don't follow after these men or you risk turning from the Christian faith altogether (v. 2:18).

Matthew 6:1—"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven."

The Pharisees didn't boast of visions and revelations, but they were spiritual intimidators. Jesus said on outside they looked impressive, but on the inside was only filth (Matt 23:25-26). Such is the case with false teachers and charlatans. They can paint a masterpiece with their words, but deep within where only God can see is anything but a Rembrandt. They may seem sincere, but their teaching isn't "holding fast" to Christ (v. 2:19). Thus, they're sincerely wrong.

HEDGING YOUR BETS

Colossians 2:20—"If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit?"

Why give up certain foods and abstain from select drinks? Why regard certain days as holy? Well, in this case, it was out of fear. The culture widely believed in a host of deities or unseen forces that governed the world. Some people worshipped the Roman gods, of course. But as Rome expanded through conquest and trade, the empire encountered new deities and religions. Why not appease some of these as well?

One big idea throughout the Roman Empire was to fear offending the gods or spirits that may exist. If you want a good harvest or healthy children, appease the gods or risk loss. It was so counter-cultural, even offensive, to reject all of this and believe that Christ *alone* is God. Though a small group of Christians in Colossae had come to believe this, it seems they were starting to waver a bit.

Paul wrote to say that as a Christian "you died" to the "elemental spirits of the world" (v. 2:20). In other words, you can't worship the

Living God and non-gods. You can't please Christ and His enemies. Stop hedging your bets—it's one or the other.

MYSTICISM, LEGALISM, ASCETICISM

The surrounding culture had pressured this little church to stop being so narrow-minded. Religious pluralism was pervasive, and the spiritual gurus were intimidating. Some encouraged believers to keep the Old Testament Law. Others encouraged a bit of mysticism or avoided being defiled by the physical world. Colossae didn't have one group of teachers, but countless ones. The city was like the region at large, a hodgepodge of religion. To each his own.

For those who encouraged Law-keeping, Paul said the Law won't bring you to God. All its rules and rituals "are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (v. 2:17). A shadow? God gave the Law to Moses, and it was good though impossible to keep. And that's the point—you can't keep it. The Law revealed to man he's a sinner, incapable of attaining God's holy standard. It foreshadowed the Messiah, the One who could keep the Law. So, quit living in the shadows where fear and intimidation thrive. Paul urged the Colossians to stay in the light with Christ.

For those who encouraged asceticism, well, it appears wise (v. 2:23). It seems God should take notice of people who starve their bodies, flog themselves, live in isolation, or forsake all that's good in life. Christian history is replete with stories of people who did this, some to the point of death.

1 Timothy 4:4—"For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."

Keeping the Old Testament Law is hard, and sacrificing all that's good in life isn't easy. So, why wouldn't God smile upon such great commitment? One reason is that it isn't of any "value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh" (v. 2:23). It can't make you holy. You're still the same sinner you were before you started doing any of this stuff. I like how Alexander Maclaren states it: "There's only thing that will put the collar on the neck of the animal within us and that is the power of the indwelling Christ."

Paul told the Colossians not to be led astray by spiritual gurus. They may look impressive, even intimidating, but he reminded them they already have Christ. What is true spirituality? Holding fast to Christ. And if you're holding fast to Him, grow in walking daily with Him.