

The Threat to a Gospel-Driven Church

Colossians 2:6-23

Four farmers went out to sow seed. The first was the self-proclaimed expert in his field. He'd been doing this the longest, and he knew what he was doing, and the best way to get it done. He often looked with silent judgment on his fellow farmers who failed to follow his example or keep his rules—rules he had developed over years of perfecting his craft: don't plant too close to the road; stay inside the fence. Water your crops at this time on these days. Don't let any of them cross-pollinate with your neighbor's. Show no mercy to weeds; get rid of them immediately, even if that means accidentally pulling out good crop here or there. He pitied his fellow farmers, really. Because he knew his system worked. Follow the rules, and you'll receive your harvest. If you find the harvest wanting in some way, then you must not have followed the rules.

The second farmer grew up working for guys like the first, and was convinced that he had it all wrong. There were better, faster ways of producing much larger yields if you were willing to be innovative and push the envelope a bit. You've got to stay ahead of the curve with the latest technology. Experiment with different methods. If you plant the seed shallower, a little closer to the service, it will sprout faster. If you genetically engineer the seed, you can make it more acceptable to the environment you're planting in; alter the makeup slightly to be more like native plants. In fact, the second farmer was willing at times to experiment with planting different seeds altogether, or mixing those seeds in—whatever made for the largest yield possible.

The third farmer looked with equal disdain on the second and the first. In fact, he didn't really like the title "farmer" at all; the term had been ruined by judgmental jerks like the first or sell-outs like the second. The third farmer was a purist, or so he thought of himself. He wanted to return to the freer, less organized ways of farming that he imagined early farmers had employed. So he rejected the idea of growing crops in cultivated fields; he sowed his seed everywhere he went, in ditches along the roads, in empty lots here and there, in neighbor's gardens. He believed most farmers were too overbearing, and that such heavy cultivating actually repressed the seeds from realizing their full potential. So once the seed was sown, he let nature take its course. No watering, no weeding, no pesticides, no domineering oversight. Just a bunch of ragamuffin gardens, scattered to and fro, figuring out life together on their authentic journeys. Though the third farmer wouldn't admit it, in the absence of attention, the weeds that grew up with his crops usually dominated the scene, such that what wasn't choked out early by them was barely distinguishable from them come harvest.

What's interesting though, is that although these first three farmers despised one another, although they differed vehemently on how to farm, they had two things in common: they all wanted to see a harvest, and they all believed that the results were in their hands.

The fourth farmer wanted to see a harvest, too. But he was less invested in his own control of the results. He wanted to be faithful, working hard, planting at the right time, watering when

necessary, cultivating and keeping the field as free of weeds as possible. He knew he had more to learn, that he wasn't a perfect farmer. That he could even learn something from the first three farmers. But he knew that the real growth happened not when he was in the field doing his thing, but when he laid down to sleep at night (cf. Mk. 4:26-29). He knew that there was something else at work in the farming process; there were forces in play far above him and beyond him. Things that he could not control, but must instead depend on. And he did depend on them, which is why he was able to sleep at night, and why he enjoyed his harvest, whatever yield it produced.

Now of course this is a parable. A parable with an implied question: when it comes to gospel ministry, what kind of farmer are we? What kind of farmer *should* we be? One that depends on our earth-bound perspectives and man-made schemes to produce a harvest? Or one that looks above and beyond himself, depending solely on Christ for growth?

We've been using a lot of agricultural metaphors the last few weeks in our survey of Colossians. Not because I grew up in Nebraska and those are the only kind of metaphors I know (I didn't actually grow up on a farm; my dad is an accountant). Rather, it's because Paul uses several agricultural metaphors in his letter to help us understand how the gospel works. It is *bearing fruit and increasing* in the whole world, just as it did among the Colossians (1:6); in other words, it's growing outward as more and more people turn away from sin and come to faith in Christ. It's also growing upward, moving God's people toward steadfast maturity in Christ, as they learn to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, *bearing fruit* in every good work and *increasing* in the knowledge of God (1:10). But that growth will only happen if God's people remain anchored in Christ. Chapter 2:6: "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, *rooted* and *built up* in him and established in the faith . . ." (2:6-7). Jesus is uniquely qualified to restore God's broken world and redeem our broken lives. He is supreme over all creation and sufficient for our redemption and reconciliation with God. Which means, that as we move forward refocusing our vision as a church, we must be driven by the gospel. The supremacy and sufficiency of Christ are the heart of a gospel-driven church.

But that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of distractions, plenty of competing perspectives on the best way to produce a harvest. Ideas and systems and strategies that sound spiritual but aren't really dependent on Christ. That actually threaten to confuse us or disenchant us with the sufficiency of Christ. Making us feel as though that we're missing something—we need something more or something else. We heard Navin's story earlier, how one of the biggest challenges growing up in India, and even the Indian church, was that there were so many alternatives to Christ. And though it will often look different, the same is true in every place and every age, not only as we come to know Christ, but as we serve Christ as well—alternative means and ideas for how to produce a harvest.

There is a great temptation in every age to try and serve God without actually depending on God. To depend upon something other than Jesus for results in ministry. That's what Paul turns to in ch. 2:6-23, and that's what we want to consider for ourselves this morning—the threat to a gospel-driven church.

Spirituality from Below: Alternatives to Christ in Colossians

Paul was aware of these kinds of threats as he ministered to various churches. He took them seriously, so much that after describing the sufficiency of Jesus and his desire for the Colossians' to be fully assured of that in 2:1-3, he says in 2:4: "I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments." There were some who were trying to water down the sufficiency of Christ for the life and ministry of the church, with what seemed like very plausible arguments. Arguments that seemed to make sense if you didn't think to carefully about them.

Similarly, after exhorting them in 2:6-7, that just as they received Christ they ought walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, he says in v. 8: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." So what were some of the threats Paul was dealing with among the Colossians?

We're not exactly sure what the so-called 'Colossian heresy' was that Paul was addressing. On the one hand it looks like a carry-over from their pagan background. The church there was mostly Gentile (non-Jewish), and the references to the worship or placation of angels, to visions, asceticism, and so on, sound kind of pagan and not very Jewish. On the other hand, things like dietary restrictions on food and drink and the special festivals mentioned in v. 16, do have a background in Israel's Mosaic covenant. And so most likely, what Paul's dealing with here is some kind of Judeo-Pagan folk religion—a syncretistic hybrid where some of the Colossians tried to infuse their Christianity with both Jewish and pagan practices, resulting in a Frankenstein version of the Christian faith, that's not really Jewish, pagan, or Christian.

But what's fascinating, however, is the motive. It doesn't appear that these false teachers or whoever-they-are are trying to invent a new religion for the sake of religion; it appears that they're really trying to serve God. They have their eyes on the harvest—a harvest of relationship, trying to deepen their intimacy with God in v. 18. And a harvest of righteousness, trying to "stop the indulgence of the flesh" in v. 23. The problem, according to Paul, is that they're trying to do these things apart from Christ. They are trying to serve God without relying on God.

Paul makes this clear in several ways. Look again at v. 8: "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and *not according to Christ*." Whatever these traditions and principles are, wherever they come from, their major problem is that *they don't accord with Christ*. Similarly, Paul's criticism of the religious practices in v. 18 is that those who advocate them are "*not holding fast to the Head* [that is Christ], from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God" (2:19).

So where do they come from? If not from God above, they come from the earth below. As Paul puts it in v. 8, philosophy and empty deceit that accords to *human tradition*—man-made rules; that accords to the *elemental spirits* or *principles* of the world—the components or forces of this earthly realm. And he mentions both of those again at the end of the passage—elemental spirits of the world (v. 20) and regulations that accord to human precepts and teaching (v. 22).

In other words, these regulations and strategies and principles come from this world—this fallen world and what it can produce and accomplish. They are not part of heaven's plan; they arise

from the earth below. They are man-made and earth-bound. It's what you might call *spirituality from below*. Serving God without depending on God. Looking instead to human effort, human strategies, human regulations, human traditions, human rules, human criteria, human ritual. Sometimes drawing on the resources of the pagan world around (the elemental spirits), taking the best of what the world can offer and trying to beef up God's program a bit. Sometimes drawing on the forms and figures of the Old Covenant under Moses, as though the power was in the forms themselves rather than the person they pointed to.

And what happens when build our spirituality from below—from what we can do or come up with in order to try and please God or serve God, rather than trusting in the God who has come down from heaven to us in Christ—what we discover is two things.

First, that *man-made religion is empty*. It produces a hollow spirituality, focused on external forms that are incapable of producing lasting change. *External forms*, like food and drink, a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath (v. 16), rather than the person to whom all of that is supposed to point. As v. 17 puts it, "These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." External forms that are *incapable of producing lasting change*. Look at v. 23: they "have the appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but *they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh*." All these rules and forms and strategies—and none of them are capable of actually promoting spiritual growth. In the end, they can only result in either pride or despair. Pride, when I'm able to keep the regulations and work my way up to God, feeling good about myself and probably looking down on others. Or despair, when I inevitably and continually fall and come face to face with my hopeless insufficiency. Man-made religion is empty, powerless to produce lasting change.

Second, it's also *divisive*. Rather than nurturing community within the Body, it actually divides it. Look at what happens to community as a result of these man-made rules edging out Jesus. Paul says in v. 16: "Therefore, *let no one pass judgment on you* in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath." When we build our spirituality on human tradition and principles, we create a community marked by judgment. Those who don't abide by the rules fall under the judgment of others. If you're rooted in Christ, don't listen to that judgment! Or again in v. 18, Paul says, "*Let no one disqualify you*," insisting on all sorts of man-made practices. When we build our spirituality from below, the inevitable outcome is the self-righteous exclusion of those who are deemed inferior and insufficient, those who don't or can't play by the rules.

When we try to serve God without depending on God, Paul says we've been taken captive. We've been taken captive. Trapped in a swirling cycle of pride, despair, judgmentalism, insecurity, frustration, competitiveness, disappointment. All because we have centered our spirituality, our relationship with God, our service to God, on ourselves instead of Christ.

Spirituality from Below: Alternatives to Christ Today

So what does that look like today, in our context? Let's go back to the parable of the four farmers for a minute. There are endless ways to replace Jesus with something else in our life and ministry, but the first three farmers represent three dominant movements in the culture of the

American church over the last several decades, each of which as we said earlier, genuinely wants to see a harvest, but believes that the results are in their hands.

The first farmer is what we might call *legalistic fundamentalism*. The assumption that because we've been doing this for a long time, we have this figured out. Nothing left to learn from others. Essentially, we turn ministry into a formula. We know what we're doing and the best way to get it done. And the key is *keeping the rules*—rules developed over years of perfecting our ministry. Rules that if you keep, God promises to bless. *Don't plant too close to the road; stay inside the fence* ('Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch', 2:21): the line of sin according to Scripture might be here, but we've built a fence clear over here, to keep you from even getting close to that line. *Water your crops at this time on these days*: this is how you spend time with the Lord in Bible reading and prayer if you want him to bless your life and ministry—thirty minutes a day, in the morning before you do anything else, or you probably hate Jesus. *Don't let allow any cross-pollination happen with your neighbors*: we can't control what they teach over at that church, so best just to stay away. They're disqualified from fellowship. *Show no mercy to weeds; get rid of them immediately, even if that means accidentally pulling out good crop here or there*: attack sin in your life and in your congregation with extreme prejudice. Make sure your people know that holiness matters and God won't tolerate sin, even if that pushes the weak ones away.

Some of us grew up in legalistic churches like that, and we're still recovering. Some of us, frankly, are prone to that kind of legalism, because it feels safe. We know what to do, and we know what we can expect from God if we do it. And if we just keep the rules, Westgate church will thrive. We look at the moral chaos in the world around us, and we think the church could do with a lot less change and a few more rules. But this is spirituality from below. Man-made rules that result in empty and divisive religion. Carrying on in quiet desperation and insecurity, as we try to keep God happy and keep his people off our back, all the while looking with silent judgment on others who ignore the rules—rules that are powerless for affecting lasting spiritual change.

The second farmer is what we might call *shallow pragmatism*. If it works, if it gets results, then God must be in it. We've experienced the drudgery and silent condemnation of legalists, and we think there's a better way. Faster ways of producing much larger yields if you're willing to be innovative and push the envelope. *Utilize all the latest technology*: beat other churches to the best website and podcasts and videos. *Experiment with different methods*: Get creative with your ministries; show them that you're not their grandparents' church. *If you plant the seed shallower, a little closer to the service, it will sprout faster*: Don't weigh people down with too much Bible or theology; just enough to get them in the door but not so much they feel uncomfortable. *If you genetically engineer the seed, you can make it more acceptable to the environment you're planting in*: cater to your audience. Find out what they're really looking for and give it to them, along with Jesus. The latest music. Better programs. The best coffee. Be relevant. Because if you do these things, you'll be able to break the 200 barrier, or the 500 barrier, or get your name listed among the fastest growing churches in America.

The problem with all this is not technology or change or innovation, or understanding your audience. We can do better in all of those ways. The problem is making ministry *consumeristic*—all about how God fits into our life and can help us heal our wounds or achieve our dreams—a message focused on *us* instead of Christ. And, again, making ministry *formulaic*. Do these things, and God will bless your ministry. It's man-centered, man-made ministry from below.

The third farmer is what we might call *vague spirituality*. Rigid legalism and shallow pragmatism have failed us. We see through them—the pain they’ve caused, their poor results, especially among young people. And we believe there’s a better way—a more authentic way. Less defined, less programmed, less organized, because organized religion is the real threat to faith. *No watering, no weeding, no pesticides, because heavy cultivating actually represses the seeds from realizing their full potential*: doctrine and authority—those are nothing more than insidious plots to control people and keep them from following their heart. After all, what God really wants is for us to be happy and fulfilled in life, to feel good about ourselves and make a difference in the world. If the Bible helps you with that great; if a little Zen Buddhism helps you with that, great. But who am I to tell someone that something the love or enjoy is wrong? We’re just a ragamuffin band of misfits figuring out life together on our authentic journeys. We’re spiritual, not religious. My church is the coffee shop, the pub, or the gym, wherever my heart’s really alive, wherever I feel connected to people.

The irony again is that as much as those who prefer a vague spirituality despise fundamentalists and pragmatists, they’re all playing the same game. Spirituality from below. Man-made, earth-bound systems for serving God without actually depending on God. And they’re each compelling in their own way. They all seem plausible from certain angles. Throwing off of the shackles of the Bible and being true to yourself is about the sexiest thing a millennial can do today. But it’s a trap. There’s a deadly irony in it. Beth Moore sounded this same warning earlier this year, when she said to a crowd of 55,000 college students:

You will watch a generation of Christians – OF CHRISTIANS – set the Bible aside in an attempt to become more like Jesus. And stunningly it will sound completely plausible. This will be perhaps the cleverest of all the devil’s schemes in your generation. Sacrifice TRUTH for LOVE’s sake.”¹

It makes sense. But it’s a trap. Because both truth and love are true. And they can’t be divorced from each other without diluting and destroying each other. As Moore says, we need to “have the courage to live in the tension of both truth and love.”²

We cannot serve God without depending on God—as tempting as that will be, in different times and different ways, moving forward. Because depending on God is *hard*. It means waiting. It means praying. It means hard work, but it means *we’re not in control*.

Spirituality from Above: The Centrality of Christ in the Church’s Life and Ministry

But thankfully, we don’t have to be. And the real freedom in serving God comes from recognizing not only that he’s in control, that the harvest is in his hands, but that he’s given us everything we need to know him and to serve him through his all-sufficient Son, Jesus Christ.

This was the big point Paul made in our passage last week, and he makes it again here in ch. 2. After warning the Colossians in v. 8 not to be taken captive by philosophies based on man-made rules instead of on Christ, he says this in v. 9:

¹ Beth Moore, January 2017, as cited at <https://twitter.com/AnnVoskamp/status/817719844997070849>.

² Moore, <https://twitter.com/AnnVoskamp/status/817719844997070849>.

For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (2:9-15)

The gospel is not about what we do; it's about what Jesus has done. What only Jesus can do. It's about who he is—the fullness of God dwelling bodily; God in the flesh. We don't have to go up to God; he has come down to us. It's about how he empowers us—“and you have been filled in him” (2:10). We don't have to come up with new ideas or ways of cultivating spirituality; Christ himself has filled us with his Spirit, and is our sufficient resource as we seek to know and serve God. The gospel is about what Christ has done to make us new. We don't have to muster up the strength to throw off our own sin; Christ has stripped us of our corrupt flesh, uniting us with him in his death. We don't have to try harder and make it up for our failures; God has canceled our debt of sin through the cross of Christ. We don't have to come up with the strength to keep serving God everyday; we have been raised with Christ, and the same power that raised him from the dead is alive in us.

And when we believe that, there is freedom and joy in serving God. Serving God without depending on God is a trap, but depending on Christ frees us for service. We work hard, “struggling with all *his energy* that he powerfully works within me” (1:29). This is the posture of the fourth farmer, knowing that there is something else at work in the process. Forces in play far above and beyond us; things we cannot control, but must instead depend on.

It doesn't mean we have arrived or have nothing left to learn; far from it. It doesn't mean we do nothing; on the contrary it ought to drive us to pray even more. If God doesn't show up, nothing will grow. But it means that our confidence in ministry is not in ourselves, our tactics or strategies, our programs or methods, how inspiring our new vision statement will be. It's in Christ. And his Word will do its work, because the cross is sufficient, and the Spirit is here. “You have been filled in him.”

And so we can sleep at night, knowing that “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come” (Mark 4:26-29).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. In your opinion or experience, what is the single most dangerous lie in the world today?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. What words or ideas are repeated in this passage that
3. How do these repetitions help us understand what the author is emphasizing or how he has arranged the passage?
4. Paul sounds several warnings in the passage. What are some of the things he warns the Colossians against?
5. Why do you think these things are so tempting for the Colossians? What are they trying to accomplish through them?
6. What is the problem with the things Paul warns them against?
7. What alternative does Paul point them to?

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. In what ways do you think the church today is most tempted to try and serve God without depending on God?
9. Which of these are you most personally prone to, and how do you respond to it?
10. How do we stay on guard against empty philosophies and plausible arguments without becoming arrogant and judgmental?
11. How does the gospel of Jesus offer a better solution for knowing and serving God?