

Mandate to Never Be Taken as a POW through Philosophy: Gnosticism in 1 Cor 1:18-25; 2:1-9; Profitless Speculation; Intellectualism of False Teachers

82. Some principles of propaganda are important to observe here. In one's search for truth, he must be able to identify the lie, an ability that is mandated of the believer in:

Colossians 2:8 - 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. (NASB)

1. The verse begins with the present active imperative of prohibition from the verb **βλέπω, blepō** which is a command to "take heed," "watch out for," or "beware." A good way to bring this into English is "Be alert." Or "Be on guard."
2. This is followed by the negative conjunction of prohibition, **μή, mē** plus the future active imperative of the verb **εἰμί, eimi**, translated "there will not be," and the indefinite enclitic pronoun **τις, tis**: "anyone."

Colossians 2:8 - Continually be alert; be on guard, that there should not be anyone ...

3. *Blepō* is a command to be alert to a present danger threatening the spiritual lives of believers at Colossae. It requires that they become alert to this danger otherwise they will continue to fall victim to it.
4. The danger they face is stated next by the present active participle of the verb:
συλαγωγέω, sulagōgeō: "to carry someone off as a prisoner of war," or "to capture someone and place him into slavery."
5. This is a compound of, first of all, **συλάω-, sulaō-** which means "to carry off as a spoil of victory, i.e., booty." When a false teacher deceives a believer into believing the lie, that believer becomes a spoil of victory. The prefix of *sulagōgeō* comes from **σόλη, sulē**: "the right of seizing the ship or cargo of a foreign merchant to cover losses received through him" (Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1671).
6. When the false teacher deceives a believer then Lucifer has recovered "cargo" he previously controlled when the person was an unbeliever. The deceived believer's soul is now held captive by him in the same way it was prior to salvation.
7. Secondly, *sulē-* is attached to the verb **ἄγω, agō**, used metaphorically: "to lead, or to induce, to allow oneself to be led and carried away."
8. In our passage, *sulagōgeō* is a hapax legomenon, a word that occurs only once in the corpus of the New Testament and is used figuratively as "the carrying off of truth into the slavery of error" (Balz and Horst, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:285).

present: Retroactive progressive; denotes that which has begun in the past and continues into the present.

active: False teachers produce the action of the verb through various propaganda techniques.

participle: Substantival; the action of the present participle occurs at the same time as the action of the main verb: “be alert.” Believers are commanded to “be alert” to the false teachings of the Gnostics:

Colossians 2:8 - Be alert [*Blepete*] that there should not [*mē*] be anyone carrying you off as prisoners of war [*sulagōgōn*] ...

NOTE: Paul’s choice of tense for the main verb is extremely important in the interpretation of this verse. Here is the way it looks in the Greek translation: *Blepete mē tis humas estai ho sulagōgōn*. The main verb is *blepete*, a present imperative of prohibition indicated by the negative conjunction *mē*.

The aurist subjunctive of prohibition would forbid a thing *before* it had begun, i.e., “Never do this!”

But the present imperative, when followed by the negative conjunction *mē*, forbids the *continuation* of doing a thing that is already in progress, i.e., “Quit doing what you are presently doing.” Many believers at Colossae were now and have been taken captive by the Gnostic philosophers.

9. What method do these false teachers use to seize believers as prisoners of war? First of all, we must remember that for the believer the theatre of battle for the Invisible War is in the soul and his only effective artillery is the truth of Bible doctrine.
10. The artillery used by the enemy is described next by the proposition **διά**, **dia** plus the ablative of agency from **φιλοσοφία**, **philosophia**: philosophy.
11. This is another compound but one that is easily recognizable to the English reader. First is the word **φιλέω**, **phileō**, “love,” and secondly, **σοφία**, **sophia**, “wisdom”, literally, the “love of wisdom.” It is the source of the English word “philosophy.”
12. Paul employs back-to-back hapax legomena, the second can be used positively or negatively and Paul applies the latter. The etymology of the word and its use by Paul in the New Testament will be helpful:

Earle, Ralph. *Word Meanings in the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 354:

Philosophy. The term “philosophy,” taken in itself, carries no bad connotation. It is said to have come as a result of the humility of Pythagoras, who called himself “a lover of (divine) wisdom.” (J. B.) Lightfoot observes: “In such a sense the term would entirely accord with the spirit and teaching of St. Paul; for it bore testimony of the insufficiency of the human intellect and the need of a revelation. But in his age it had come to be associated generally with the idea of subtle dialectics and profitless speculation; while in this particular instance it was combined with a mystic cosmogony and angelology which contributed a fresh element of danger” (Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 179). (J. B.) Phillips translates the word here “intellectualism” (Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*).

Vine, W. E. *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 853-54:

PHILOSOPHIA (φιλοσοφία) denotes the love and pursuit of wisdom, hence, philosophy, the investigation of truth and nature; in Colossians 2:8, the so-called philosophy of false teachers. It is worth observing that this word, which to the Greeks denoted the highest effort of the intellect, occurs here alone in Paul’s writings ... the Gospel had deposed the term as inadequate to the higher standard whether of knowledge or of practice.

Zodhiates, Spiros (gen. ed.). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Rev. ed. (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1992), 1447:

φιλοσοφία *philosophia*; Love of wisdom, philosophy, which came to mean the doctrine or tenets of the heathen or Gentile philosophers. It carries a negative connotation and refers to quasi-religious doctrines and speculations (e.g., Gnosticism) all of which are irreconcilable with the Christian faith.

Orr, James (gen. ed.) *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 4:2385:

In the one place in which the term philosophy appears in the New Testament (Colossians 2:8), it seems to mean the first beginnings of Gnosticism in the Christian church. Paul warns his readers against it, as he also does the Corinthians against the “wisdom” of the Greeks (1 **Corinthians 1:19ff**; 1 **Corinthians 2:5-6**).

13. It is very instructive to read Paul’s polemics against Gnosticism in the references highlighted above. Each 1 Corinthian passage should be read in the context of the surrounding verses.
14. From these sources we are able to extract several concepts that define *philosophia* in the sense intended by Paul:
 - Insufficiency of the human intellect.
 - Profitless speculation.
 - Intellectualism.
 - Philosophy of false teachers.
 - Inadequate to the higher standard.
 - Quasi-religious doctrines and speculations.
 - The first beginnings of Gnosticism in the Christian church.
15. Paul uses *philosophia* to describe the false teachings of Greek Gnosticism which too often distracted believers from orthodox instruction of biblical truth in the first century.