

Not Of This World - thinking through some secular training

Reading through Colossians recently, I felt a great challenge from the following verses in Colossians 2. We'll take a closer look at these and then think about them - hopefully to get you thinking and questioning, disagreeing with me even - but at least iron can sharpen iron. Feel free to feedback any thoughts you have! So, some thoughts...

Colossians 2.20-23: Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Colossians 3.1-2 - Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Some Secular Training

I recently went on a training course based on some principles by a guy called Stephen Covey. You may have heard of them, they're called 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People' or just the '7 Habits' (no, we're not talking about what nuns wear...) Along with lots of training like this, there are lots of great principles, along with business and management 'speak' like 'Circles of Influence' (not like crop circles...) and a 'Circle of Concern' (maybe a circle that looks a bit like a square..? Joke!) Covey himself is a Mormon who disbelieves in the Trinity of God, and who merely puts the Bible on a par with any other 'wisdom literature' etc.

I have seen quite a lot of this creep into the church from the world of business. Now to be clear, I'm not against this kind of training. I've done loads of things - from this '7 Habits' through to the personality test from Myers-Briggs (The 'Type Indicator') that identifies what kind of person you are (taken from Carl Jung who dabbled in the occult and saw psychoanalysis as superior to religion). We live in a world with different points of view, can always learn from other people and just because people aren't Christians (or are even hostile to God) we must value them and learn where we can.

I've also sat through some incredibly boring training sessions like these in many venues, delivered by many different people! (OK, so I know many Christian things can be boring or badly done too!)

Colossians 2 and 3

In these Bible verses, Paul is speaking against religious people wrongly demanding certain religious activities. Instead, Paul argues, we have freedom in Christ from these religious rules. So what we say has to be taken in the context of what Paul was saying, who to and on what basis - different to us today in some ways. But we can learn lessons...

Colossians 2.8 - See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

So how do we apply this in the context of training?

1. We need to be careful about hollow and deceptive philosophy that depends on human traditions and any spiritual force other than Christ. Yes, Paul was speaking to the church about things inside the church at times, but his words have a wider application. There is such tremendous wisdom and power inside the Bible, that if we were to read it, know it, speak it and live in its truth we would be totally different. Paul reminds us in Colossians 2.7 that we must live in Christ - being rooted, built up and strengthened in the faith through Jesus. While God uses people and things, his main way of communicating is through his Word and prayer.
2. The Amplified puts Colossians 2.8 like this: See to it that no one carries you off as spoil or makes you yourselves captive by his so-called philosophy and intellectualism and vain deceit (idle fancies and plain nonsense), following human tradition (men's ideas of the material rather than the spiritual world), just crude notions following the rudimentary and elemental teachings of the universe and disregarding [the teachings of] Christ (the Messiah).

The warning is that we are not 'plundered' by other people. In war, the victors very often take what once belonged to their enemy as 'spoil' for themselves. Paul warns us not to let this happen to us and not to be led astray by so-called philosophy, intellectualism and vain deceit. The amount of people with a strong faith that have been shaken or lost their faith through theology courses and religious courses is extraordinary - these places are committed to intellectual pursuit but underlying it there's often a desire to undermine the Bible - as proved by those who fall away from God. The Bible teacher Derek Prince was a philosopher at Cambridge University before meeting Jesus and described what he'd learned as intellectual nonsense basically, the art of confusing people through puffed up knowledge and theories. He read the Bible and from a logical point of view it made more sense than anything else!

3. Paul also warns us not to follow human tradition or man's ideas of the material world around us. Basically everyone is a worshipper of something in the world. Everyone serves a 'god' of one sort or another. People may not realise it but they may serve the gods of money, of holiday, of pleasure, of power, of influence, of sex, of music. They are actually enslaved to these things. Paul calls all of this so-called intellectualism, "rudimentary and elemental teachings of the universe." So, far from being more intelligent and educated than the Bible, this world is actually following very crude, very basic science and reasonings. Why? Because at the core of all of this they disregard the teachings of Christ. Only with Christ can we truly understand anything. So why try to find meaning elsewhere?

4. Colossians 2 continues, saying *"Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!'"? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings."*

Paul can't understand why the Colossians would submit to the world and its pointless rules and ways of seeing things, when they had been set free (died with, risen again with) through Christ. It would be like finding a new fantastic perfect job and then going back to your low paid, abusive, long-hours job you hated. You wouldn't do it. Paul isn't talking about disobeying the law. Instead he's pointing to a freedom we have in Christ to live life in Christ. The world's theories, ideas, ways of doing and seeing things will perish over time because they're only based on human commands and teachings. Instead, Paul points out, our life with Christ is eternal. He made the universe under God's direction. In him and through him are all things, he created all things, he is before all things and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1.15-18). That's a pretty full and complete list there! The Bible is telling us that in Christ is everything we need. It's not saying don't do and learn other things, but it's saying that all we really need is Christ. So we put him first, seek his face continually and everything else comes and is secondary...

Christ First

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

The focus of what Paul is saying is that we must set our hearts on things above where Christ is - on heavenly things and not on earthly things. As the famous phrase says, 'we don't want to be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly use' but equally importantly, we don't want to be so earthly minded, we're no heavenly use!

The truth is that if we studied the Bible more carefully and effectively, we'd see that everything we need is contained within the Bible. Even the so-called expertise of the world can be found in the Word of God more deeply, effectively and powerfully. It's just that we need to spend time asking God to reveal and then extracting the principles.

The final thing I'd caution against is that often just to get ourselves noticed, affiliated, approved etc we connect with other organisations that don't share our values and can even foist rules and regulations on us which we end up having to implement. Often these aren't contrary to, but aren't fully supported by Biblical ways and principles.

"Often the way the world does things changes and is found to be ineffective. Yet the Bible is unchanging, the principles work perfectly. Let's not settle for less than the best."

Final Thoughts

We should all think carefully before committing to some training programmes (or affiliations) that the experts recommend (or that the world seems to demand). It may be useful and what you need. But you may equally want to consider:

- The motivation behind it. Does God really want you to be 'successful' as the world sees it, or obedient to him?
- The spiritual basis of what's said. Do you really want to be doing stuff designed by those with occultic or anti-Christian theories?
- The agenda behind it. Is it there to help you in your ministry or serve the authors or the world?

If you're happy with all this and feel that God is in this, then that's great to go for it. We're not advocating certain training things aren't done. But we're just asking the question and getting each other to think :)