

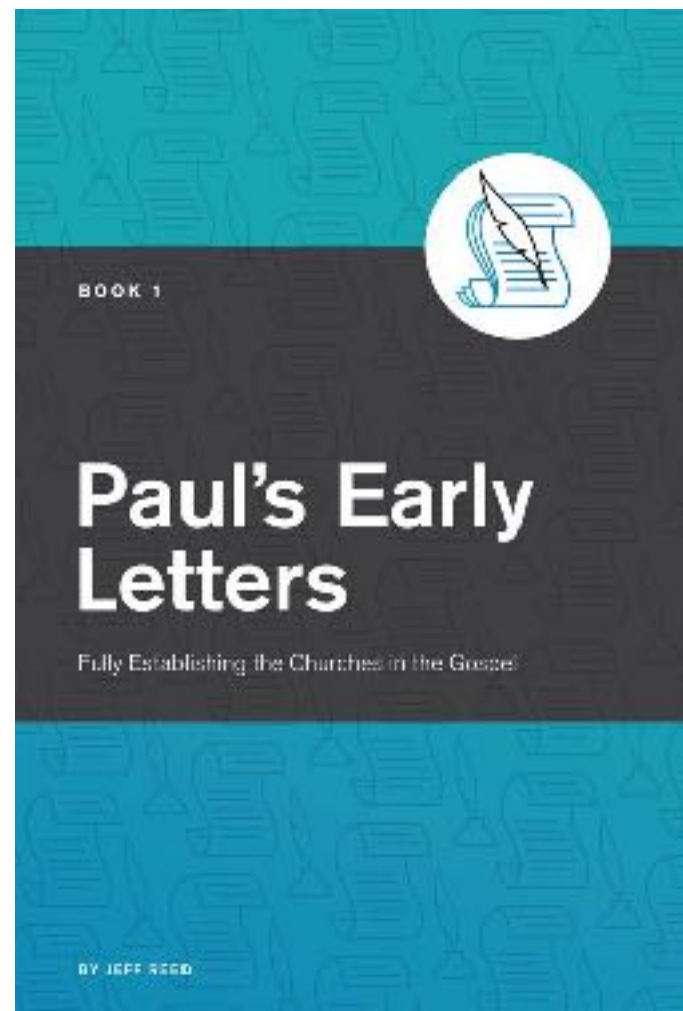
Paul's Middle Letters: Colossians—Philemon

Issue: Identifying the First Principles of the World

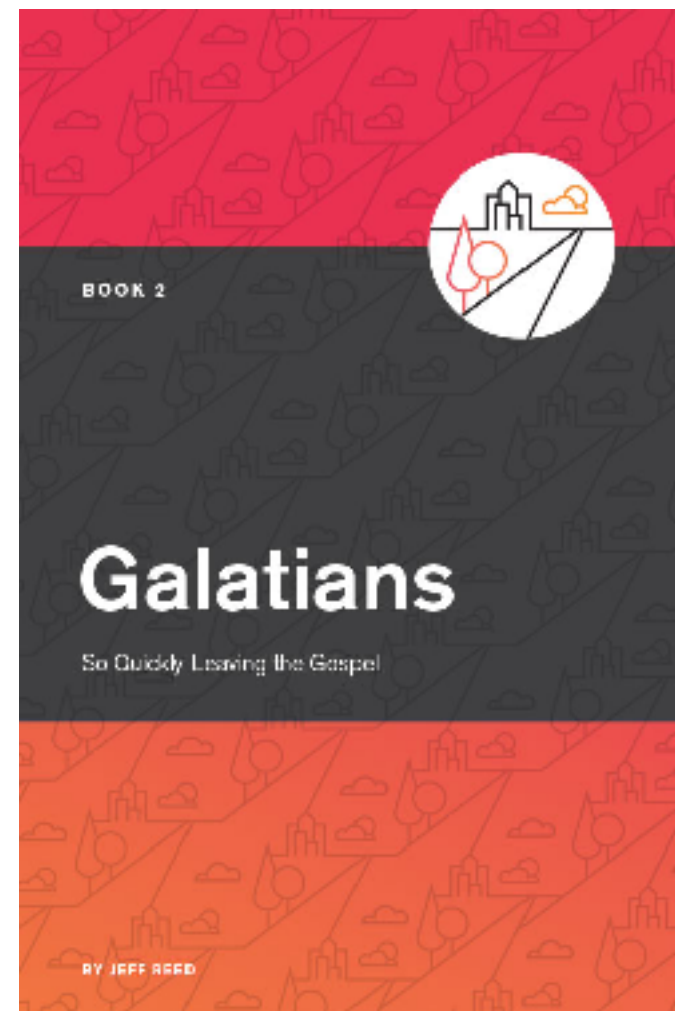
Questions:

1. In what way does the world have a set of elementary principles? What does Paul mean here? Is Paul saying all philosophy, all principles, and human traditions are bad?
2. What does he mean to not be taken captive by the philosophy “according to human tradition”?
3. What is the essence of the first principles of the world—of its philosophy and human tradition?
4. What is the outcome of living by the first principles of this world? by its human tradition and philosophy?

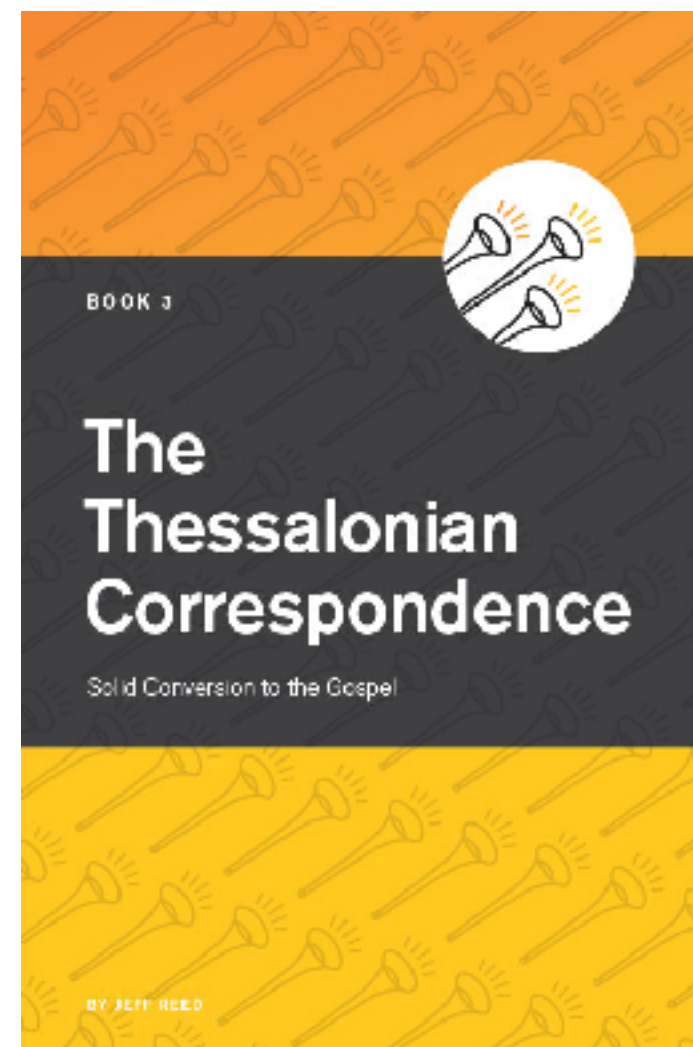
Paul's Early Letters



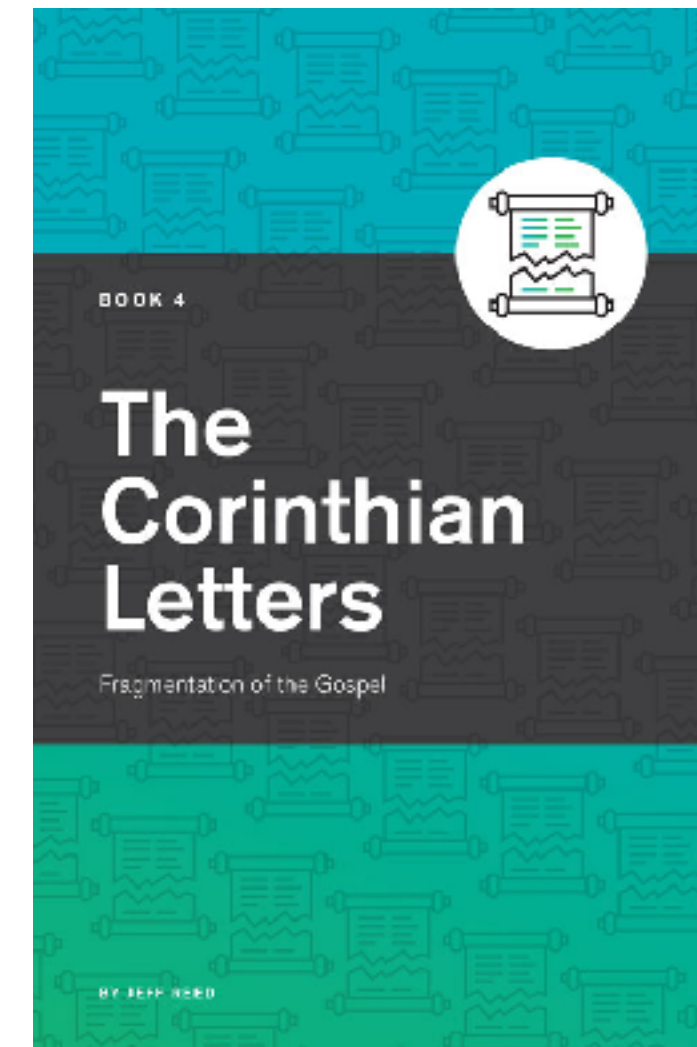
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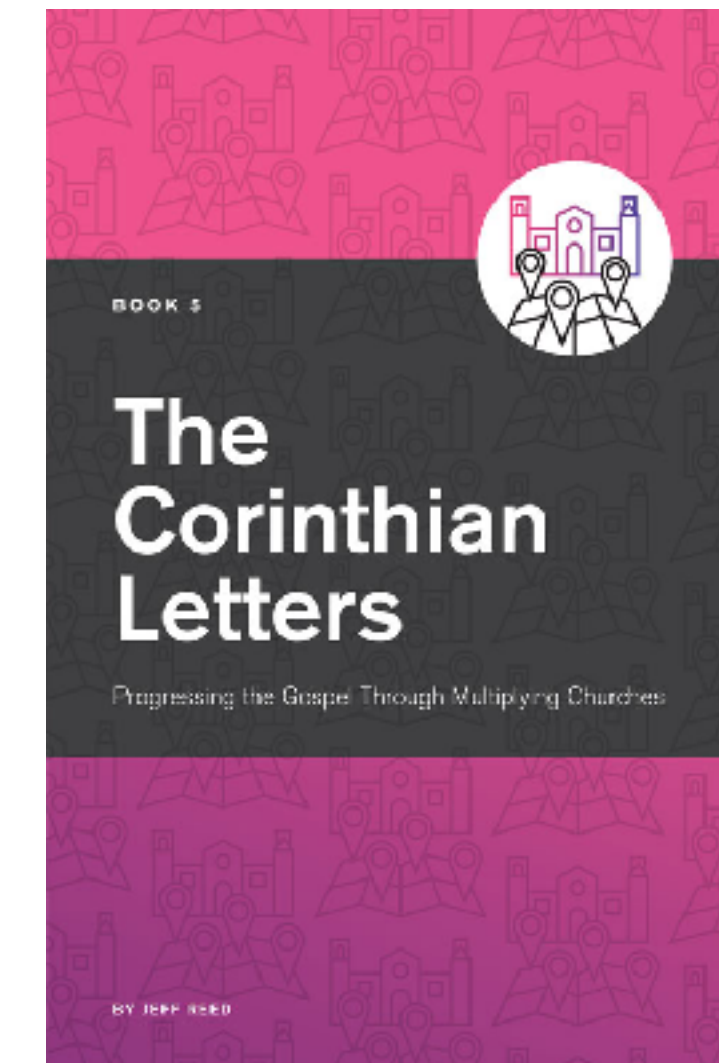
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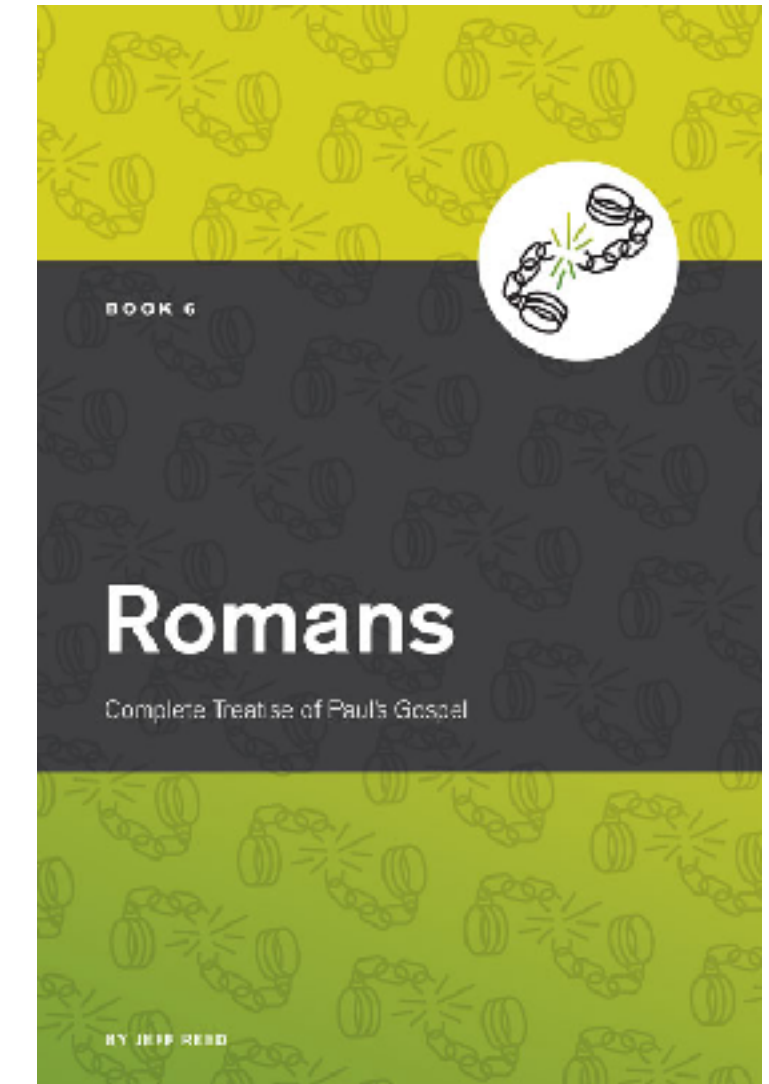
Winter/Sum. 51



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Nov. 56



Paul's Middle Letters



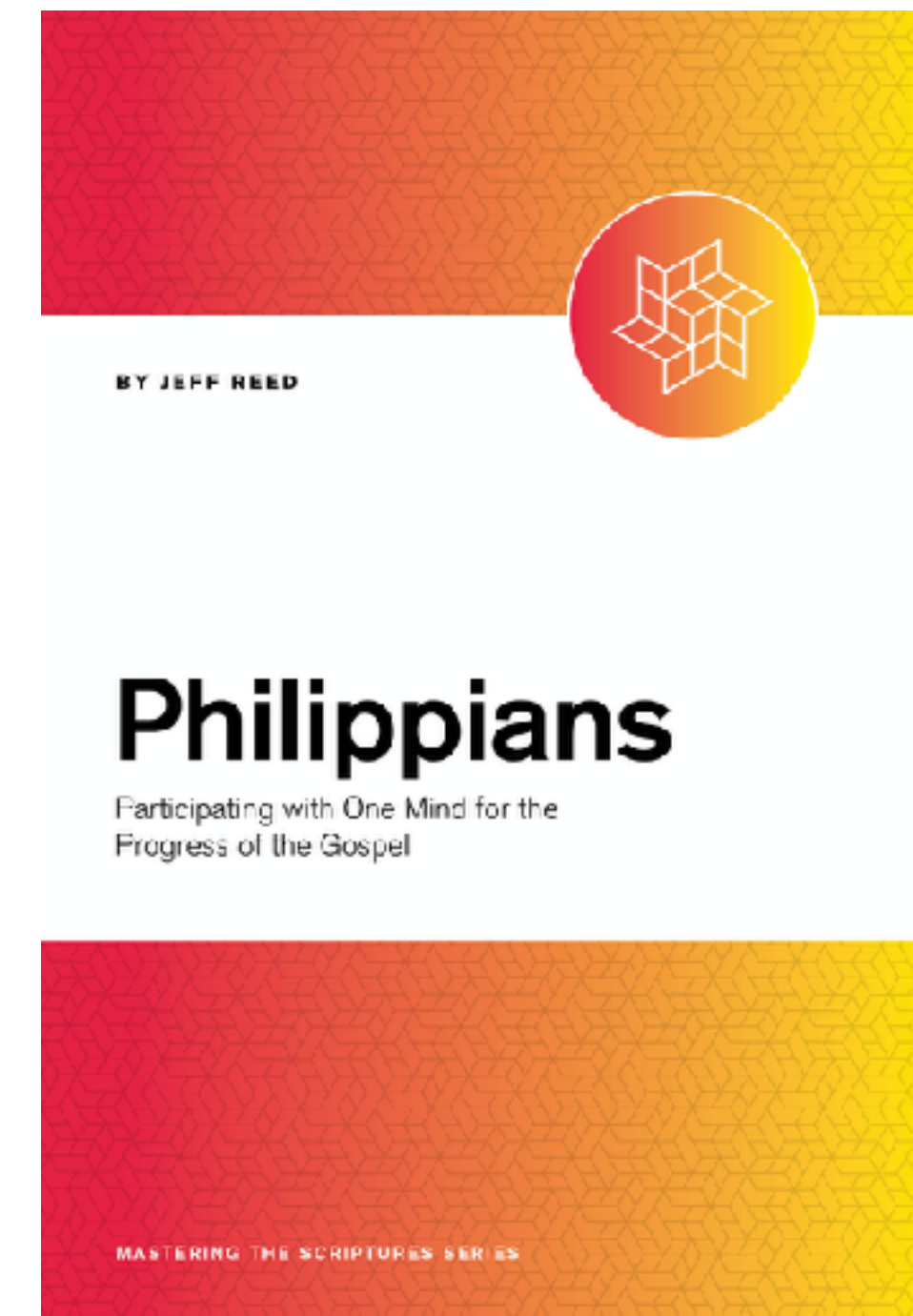
Feb. 60 to March 62



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Spring 62



Paul's Middle Letters

New Testament Theology

It is critical that we treat these letters as a collection within Paul's larger collection.

These letters build on each other as they unfold. And while they each stand alone as a letter to a particular set of churches, they all deal with similar issues that together present a very clear picture of establishing churches in Christ's grand strategy, including a full picture of the centrality of church networks in that strategy.

New Perspective on Paul

Old Perspective on Paul

Paul's letters contain miscellaneous, often unrelated topics, that would be useful for future believers, especially in dealing with sin, salvation, and living the Christian life. These topics are a significant part of today's ever growing systematic theologies.

New Perspective on Paul

Paul's letters form a coherent, interlocking shape, foundational for churches in any generation to fully understand Christ's grand strategy of the Church being central to His unfolding kingdom and to live in full alignment of that grand strategy.

Paul's Middle Letters — Ephesians

Ephesians — Hub Churches

Ephesians: A manifesto revealing Christ's "grand strategy" — the Church — to his key "hub" churches in Ephesus, with special attention to training the elders of this strategic city in the whole plan of Christ for an entire 3-year period.

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians, Philemon

Colossians—Cluster Churches

Colossians: An almost identical letter to Ephesians (along with Philemon), written to the house churches scattered throughout the Lycus Valley (Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis) one year after writing his “manifesto” to the Ephesian churches to help them, at a very practical level, to implement the new church paradigm in their network of churches—a model to be used as a framework for the entire history of clusters of churches down through the centuries.

Philemon: To practically illustrate to the network of churches in the Lycus Valley the importance of Christ's grand strategy of the kingdom through the Church, in restructuring all their social relationships—including slavery—around the church as a family of families, the household social structure of the church, which was evident in the Greek “republic” ideal of the day but fully realized in the emerging kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Paul's Middle Letters — Ephesians

Philippi — A Strategic Partner Church

Philippi: a strategic network of churches in Philippi that participated with Paul from its inception. After Paul's full and mature presentation of the centrality of the Church as the heart of Christ's grand strategy for bringing in the kingdom in his letter to the Ephesians, Philippians illustrates the importance of churches participating with one mind in the progress of the gospel through His grand strategy — the Church.

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

As you will see

Ephesians—is mostly Christ's grand strategy and has a little on Paul's network.

Colossians–Philemon—is similar on Christ's grand strategy and has a lot on Paul's network.

Philippians—is mostly on participating in Christ's grand strategy through Paul's network.

All 4 letters use similar terminology and sort of work as one growing theology of Christ's vision and mission for His churches.

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

These whole sections are parallel:

Ephesians 1:1–3:21

Colossians 1:1–2:5

The next sections are parallel as well:

Ephesians 4:1–6:10

Colossians 2:6–4:6

Then finally:

Ephesians 6:21–23

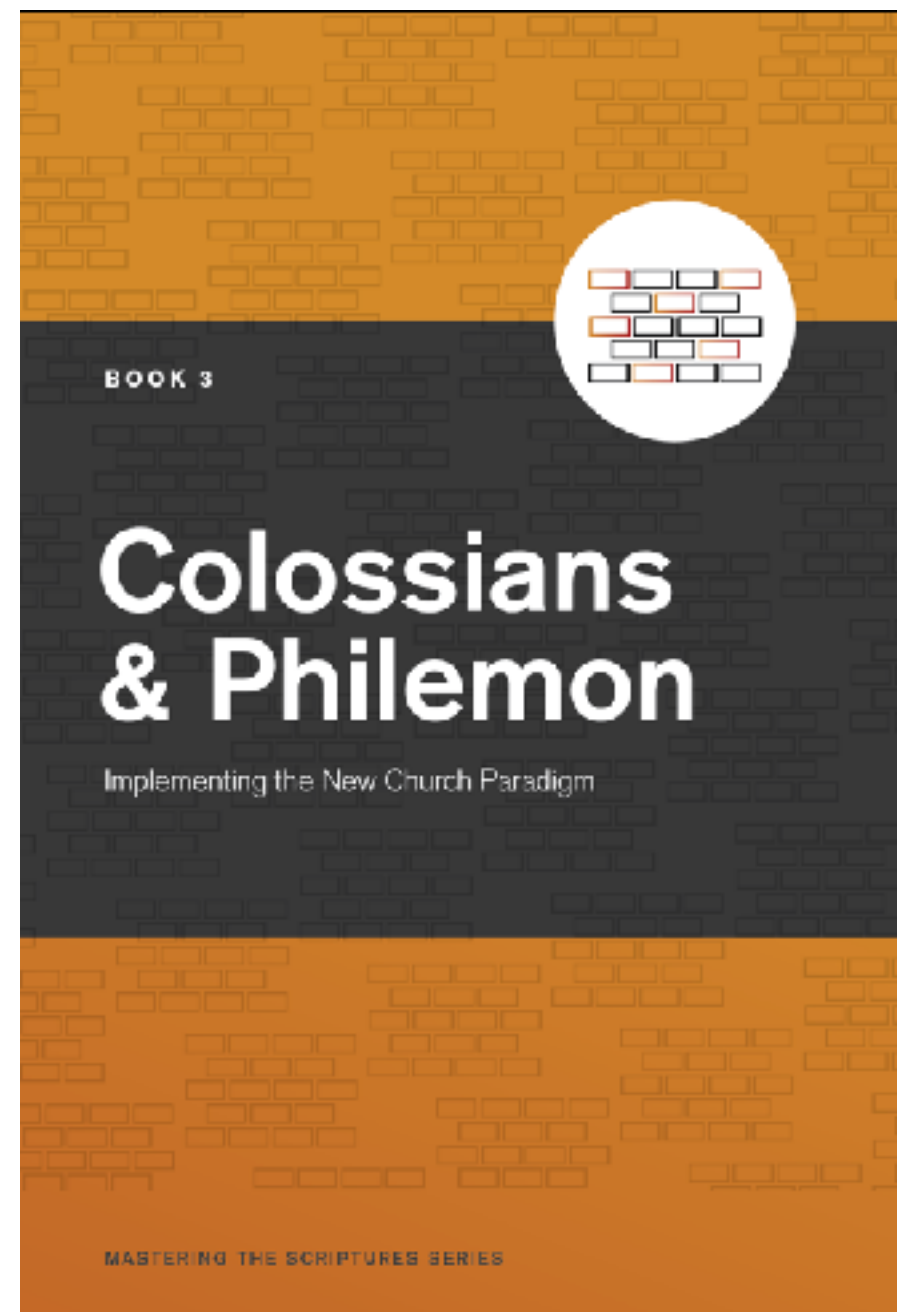
Colossians 4:7–18

Colossians

Implementing the New Church Paradigm



Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians



Session 1: Situating the Lycus Valley Church in Christ's Grand Strategy

Session 2: First Principles of the World

Session 3: First Principles of Christ

Session 4: The Importance of Network
—the Lycus Valley Network

Session 5: Philemon—Doing Theology
in the Network

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Let's begin with a quick review of what we know so far, to keep clear on Paul's coherent thought unfolding in the letter.

What was Paul doing at the end of his letter to the Colossians?

- He was introducing them to his team: John Mark, Luke, etc.
- He was building a relationship with them, with all the greetings, including writing the last section by his own hand.
- He was building a cluster network with the 3 cities by the letter exchange and by greetings from the churches of Laodicea.
- He was establishing the practical authority of his team by giving his instructions to his team members for Colossae.

This all becomes a model for building future complex apostolic networks.

Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters

What did we learn last time from Colossians 1:1–2:5?

1. Paul is writing this letter to firmly root the churches in the Lycus Valley in their fairly recent conversions.
2. He is building on the work of one of his team members—Epaphras—pulling the churches into fully participating in his network, in the global expansion of the Church, and in his unique apostolic authority.
3. He is skillfully drawing on the Ephesians manifesto to carefully establish them in Christ and His grand strategy.
4. Everybody on his team is praying for them to fully grasp what has happened to them and who they are now (especially when you see the network conclusion in 4:7–18).
5. Paul is writing the Ephesians–Colossians letters with a view of them becoming a template for establishing churches and growing church-based networks around Christ's grand strategy.
6. Part of establishing new churches is to help them realize that they are part of an apostolic network with authority and that they are part of a global movement that will change the world.

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

2:1 For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. ² I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:1–7

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

What is Paul worried about with the Lycus Valley churches?

⁴ I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.

Plausible arguments — persuasive speech

He explains this more in 2:8

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

Colossians 2:8–15

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

What is Paul worried about with the Lycus Valley churches?

Several words continue to develop his fear

philosophy—human understanding, human wisdom; in a wide sense scientific men, learned men

Kittle—5 types of philosophies of the day: Sophism, Plato and Aristotle, the Hellenistic Period, Hellenistic Judaism, Rabbinic Judaism

human tradition—a handing down of human tradition, regulation (See Kung's paradigms)

elementary spirits of the universe—basic principles, elementary concepts; in education of the time, used for first principles

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

What is Paul worried about with the Lycus Valley churches?

Paul knew the churches came from philosophies that were very different from that of Christ. Many out there were arguing a philosophy that was different from Christ's — with a different set of first principles. They were making logical, enticing arguments.

In the rest of Colossians 2 and 3, Paul will lay out the contrasting philosophies. Even though there were several major philosophies surrounding them in their culture, he implies they all started from the same set of first principles of the world.

He will start by summarizing the core first principles of the world. What are they?

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷ These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Colossians 2:16–19

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”? ²² All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

Colossians 2:20–23

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

Core first principles of the world—essence of the world's philosophy:

1. “Food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths” 2:16
2. “Insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking” 2:18
3. “Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”?
²² All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings.” 2:21–22
4. “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence. 2:23

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

First principles of the universe

Mixture of the following

- restrictions on food and drink
- mystical, supernatural worship
- religious–cult regulations
- cult rituals, rites
- all sorts of lifestyle rules and regulations
- human commands and teachings

Remember, Paul is not trying to give an exhaustive or exact list of the first principles of the world, but he is giving the essence, which can easily be applied to all the philosophies of the world (political, religious or cultural) in a way that the Colossian churches would be able to think through whatever philosophy they are bringing into their new life in Christ.

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

The main part of Paul's argument is that these principles are of no value—they don't work.

And they end in devastation.

Is Paul saying everything in the world is bad? No, God created the world. Proverbs 8 tells us it is all an expression of His wisdom and has much to be discovered and appreciated. It all points to Him.

Paul is talking about man's philosophy built on the first principles of the world that Satan uses to distort everything cultural, political, and the religious system. It is based on a core set of principles and traditions that are always flawed in the same way because man is fallen and the world is under a curse.

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

The key seems to be the term “promoting self-imposed piety” 2:23.

promoting self-imposed piety—self-imposed religion, religion thought up by himself

This means any philosophy thought up by man is man-made with the same fundamental flawed principles. And the Lycus Valley churches were susceptible to either remaining or falling back into any one of them.

As we will discover next session, unless they get fully established, they will mix their old principles and philosophy of the world and the principles and philosophy of Christ.

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

¹ So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.... ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Colossians 3:1–4; 9–11

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Remember, there were about 5 types of philosophies of the day with human traditions and first principles in how to live.

5 types of philosophies of the day: Sophism, Plato and Aristotle, the Hellenistic Period, Hellenistic Judaism, Rabbinic Judaism

They all had a mixture of the above elements.

What did they have in common? They were all based in “self-imposed piety, humility, and self-denial efforts.” Man's own efforts.

Was Paul saying these philosophies of the world were all bad? There are persuasive arguments in each one of them. But they were built on the wrong foundation, not on Christ and His philosophy. We will look at Christ's philosophy next week.

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

“In that renewal there is no longer...”

In what renewal?

“the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”

What knowledge?

“no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Paul lists several philosophies of the world based on the first principles of the world

- Greek — Did the Greeks have a philosophy? First Principles? Plato — the Republic; Aristotle — First Principles
- Jewish — Did the Jewish people of Paul's day have a philosophy? Human traditions and sects based on the principles of the world?
- Barbarian — uncivilized, non-Greek, speaking another language (closest to ethnic tribes today)
- Scythian — Iranian nomads with no kingdom (that would change)
- Slavery — both a political and cultural philosophy

Philosophies of the world — based on a core set of first principles can be

- cultural
- political
- religious

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

The result from the first principles of the world—human traditions and philosophy

²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

The result of these human philosophies and their core “first principles”

Individually and culturally/politically/religiously

Paul's Middle Letters – Colossians

Remember what Paul is doing and not doing. Remember how Paul is doing theology.

Paul is a coherent thinker (New Perspective of Paul).

1. He is not trying to say what is true and not true in philosophies of the world and human traditions passed on down.
2. He is generalizing at a principle level that complete philosophies and human traditions, including religious systems (including Jewish and Christian traditions), are ultimately built on a set of first principles.
3. By using the phrase “plausible arguments,” he is assuming there is truth in all of these systems, but when the world and man build them, ultimately they wind up opposing Christ's first principles.
4. Paul was reasoning from the philosophy, first principles, and grand strategy Christ had revealed to him. It allowed him to assess every other cultural, philosophical, and political philosophy with a simple process of pushing them up to their first principles.

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Let's look at the idea of "plausible arguments," Paul' used in 2:6. It is very important.

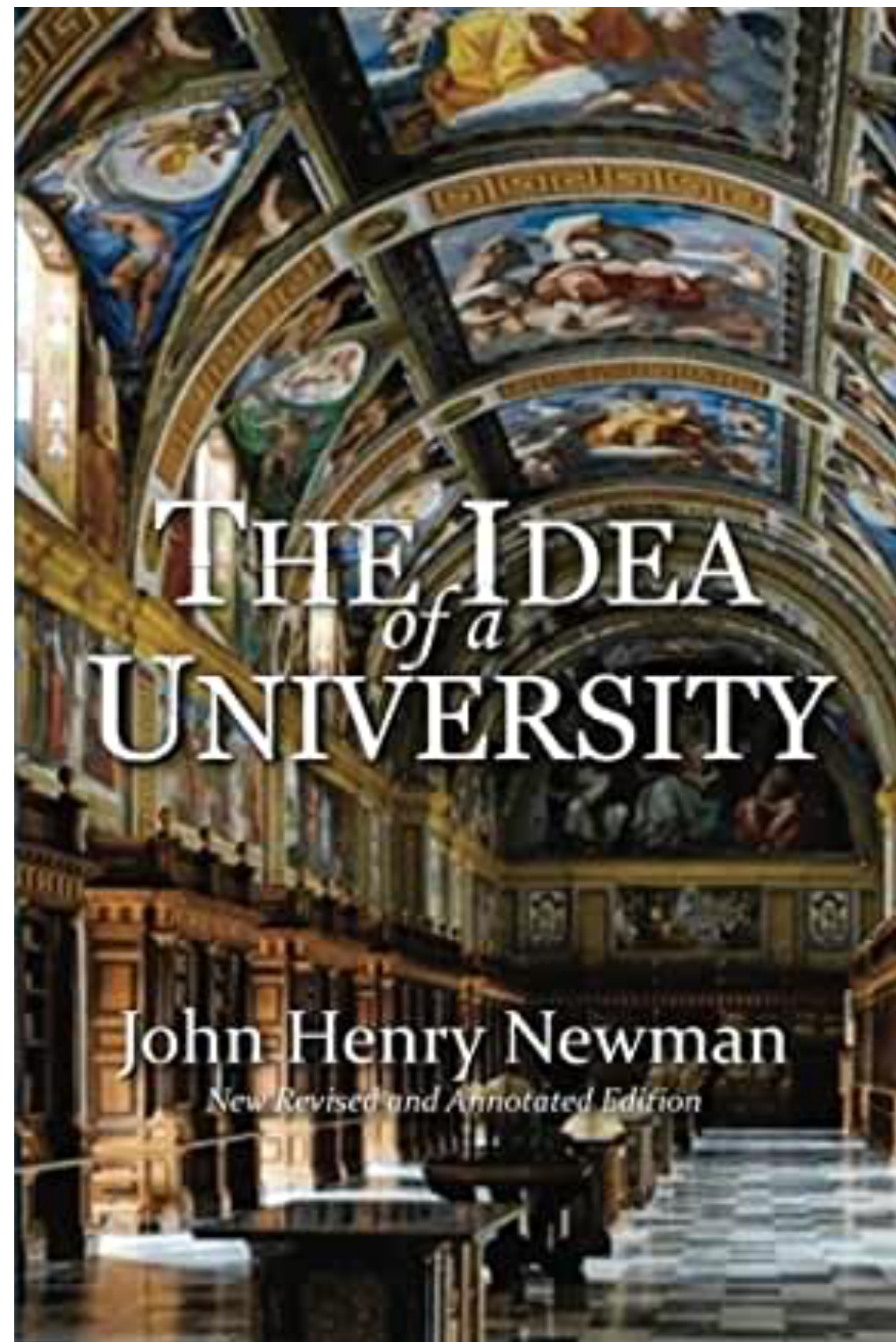
The issue: These new Christians were being deceived, being taken captive to man-made philosophies, even "so called" philosophies of Christ that were mixed with human traditions not built on Christ's philosophy, Christ's first principles.

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit" 2:8.
He is afraid they will build their new life on something other than Christ's grand strategy and philosophy-first principles.

I want to refer to two key writings here:

1. John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*
2. Hans Khun's *Christianity: Essence, History and Future*

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

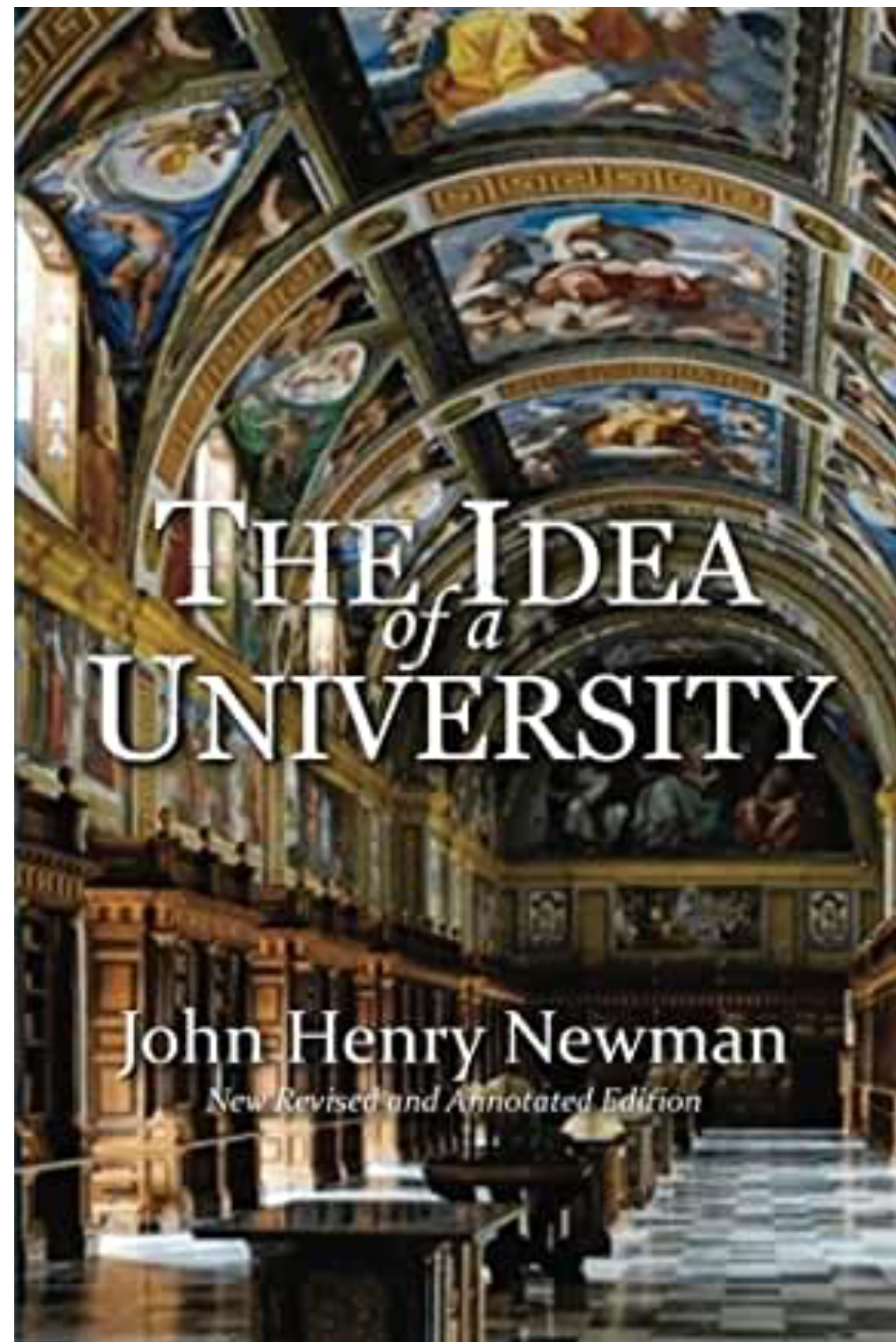


“Talents for speculation and original inquiry he has none, nor has he formed the invaluable habit of pushing things up to their first principles, or of collecting dry and unamusing facts as the materials for reasoning.

“Still so far I readily grant, that the cultivation of the ‘understanding,’ of a ‘talent for speculation and original inquiry,’ and of ‘the habit of pushing things up to their first principles,’ is a principal portion of a good or liberal education.”

Newman, John Henry Cardinal. *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame Series in Great Books) (p. 122). University of Notre Dame Press. Kindle Edition.

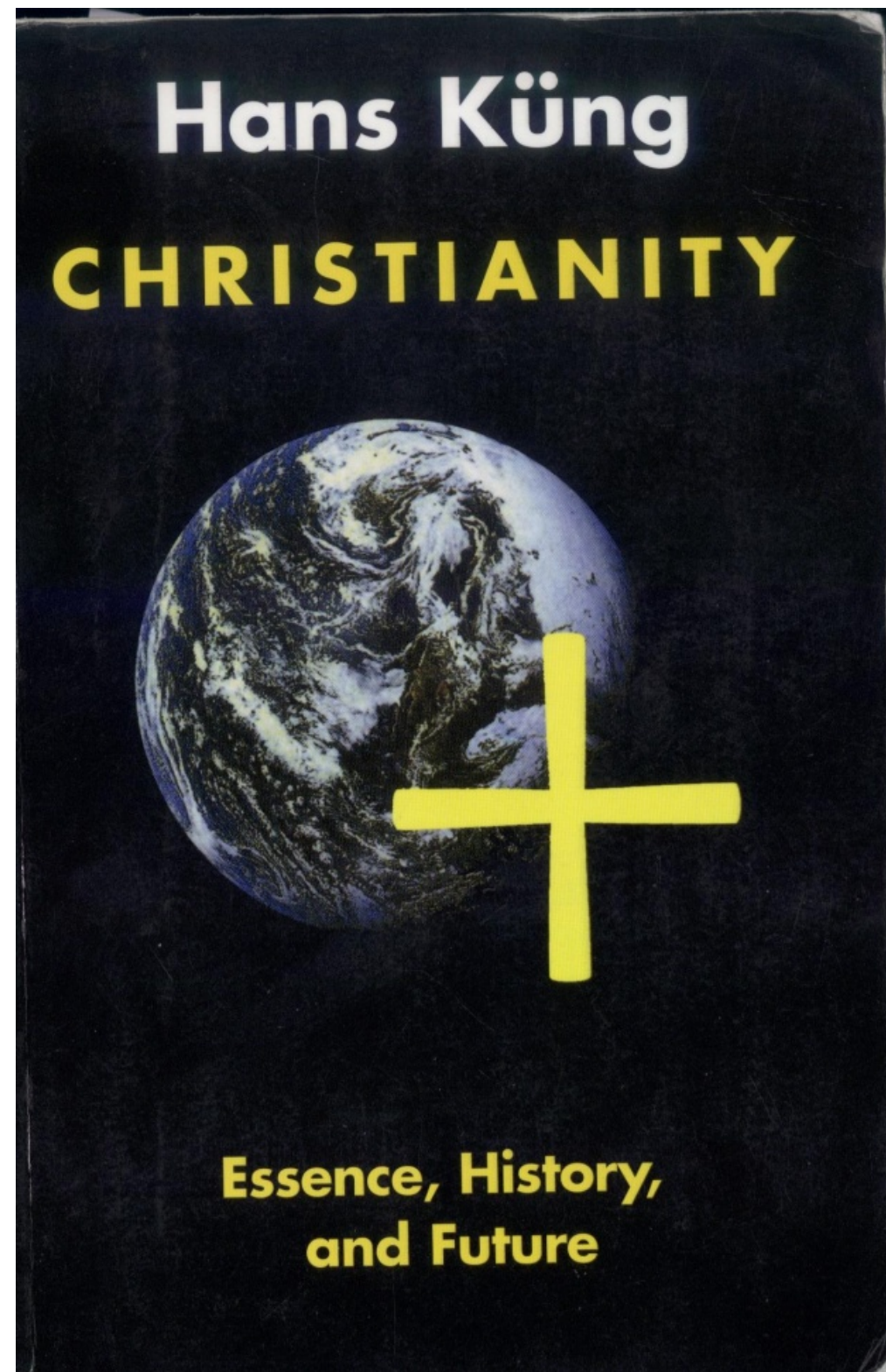
Paul's Middle Letters – Colossians



In everything we do, as Christians, in the university, in our work and profession, and in life in general, we must start with what is in front of us, and begin the process of pushing that philosophy up to the first principles, discovering truth along the way (Proverbs 8), discovering truth but aligning that truth with Christ's grand strategy and philosophy-first principles.

That is doing theology in culture as Paul models and describes.

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians



Kuhn identifies 6 Christian paradigms/philosophies down through church history that have turned into an ongoing tradition:

Primitive Christian Apocalyptic (Paul)

Ancient Church Hellenistic — Orthodox traditionalism

Medieval Roman-Catholic — Roman Catholic authoritarianism

Reformation Protestant — Protestant Fundamentalism

Modern Enlightenment — Liberal Modernism

Contemporary Ecumenical? Liberation theology?

These are mixed human traditions, philosophies of Christ

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Newman was right.

Lesson to Christian college professors: You must keep “pushing up to the first principles” of every discipline.

But you must first begin with the first principles of Christ as your foundation, or your “creative inquiry” will go astray.

If we are to think and serve creatively in this world, we need Christians who understand their identity—founded on Christ—His philosophy and first principles, not the world's.

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Your identity and the first principles of the world

If your primary identity/philosophy/first principles

...is being a Baptist, you are a captive of the world

...is being a Catholic, you are a captive

...is being an American, you are a captive

...is being a conservative Christian, you are a captive

...is being a progressive, you are a captive

...is being an African, Chinese, Indian, you are a captive

Next week we will look Christ's philosophy-first principles in contrast to the world's, or a mixture of the world's and Christ's

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

What is Paul doing in Colossians? In his middle letters? In his entire corpus of 13 letters?

He is making sure his churches are built on a solid foundation, rooted in Christ's grand strategy, His first principles, in His philosophy, pure and unmixed.

That is what we are doing in this series.

That is what we are doing in all of our resources and strategies.

Calling for a return to “the way of Christ and His apostles.”

Laboring to shape the next Christendom around Christ's grand strategy, His philosophy-first principles.

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Issue: Importance of understanding the contrasting first principles of the world

Questions:

1. What is the essence of the first principles of this world—its philosophies and human traditions in our lives and culture?
2. Which ones are religious in nature? which ones are political? which ones are cultural?
3. How do we avoid being taken captive by the world's principles—its philosophy and human traditions?
4. What will be the outcome if we live by the first principles of this world?