

# Wings

---

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”  
Isaiah 40:31*



October 16, 2011

## Infantile Religion

Early Christians struggled to remain loyal to Christ without reverting to religions that were suited to a more primitive stage of human development. Modern Christians have the same struggle.

“Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under *the elements of the world*. . . . But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly *elements*, to which you desire again to be in bondage?” (Gal. 4:3, 9).

“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the *basic principles of the world*, and not according to Christ. . . . Therefore, if you died with Christ from the *basic principles of the world*, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle’ (Col. 2:8, 20-21).

Our attention in both of these passages is drawn to the phrase, “elements (principles) of the world.” In both passages the original Greek word is *sto-*

*icheia*, translated literally, “that which is arranged in a row,” such as the letters of the Greek alphabet. The word was used to describe the basics of a subject. We use a similar expression when we speak of “the ABCs of science,” for example.

The meaning of this phrase in Galatians and Colossians can be gleaned from the contexts. In both cases, Paul was writing to predominantly Gentile Christians who were being lured into alternate versions of Christianity: either Pharisaic Judaism (Galatians) or an early form of Gnosticism (Colossians). In both cases, taking the bait would involve a step backwards into a more primitive religion. In Galatians, Paul illustrated the threat by describing a young boy growing into manhood. In his childhood, the boy requires tutors and guardians to teach him the basics of life and keep him out of trouble. But when he grows into adulthood, he is fully prepared to take on the role of master of his father’s estate; he no longer needs the tutors and guardians of his childhood. Likewise, both Judaism and the pagan religions, with their emphasis on exter-

nal rituals and regulations, such as observing holy days (Gal. 4:10) and asceticism (Col. 2:21), were inferior to the religion of Christ. By adopting these alternate versions of Christianity, these Gentile Christians would be returning to an infantile religion. They already had everything they needed in Christ; why give it up for a regressive substitute?

Before we tsk-tsk our first-century brethren for being so foolish, we should take a hard look at our own religion. We are not threatened by Judaism or Gnosticism today, but we have our own version of a religion that offers spirituality through excessive emphasis on external regulations. When we define faithfulness in terms of adherence to a complex code of moral conduct that regulates every detail of personal conduct, or insist on allegiance to an ecclesiastical rulebook that ensures we have all the externals arranged just so, then we are dangerously close to doing what Paul warned us not to do. The religion of Christ, properly understood and applied, frees us from reliance on these childish crutches.

– David King