

Sermon text The Reality of Christ vs. Religion

The Reality of Christ vs. Religion

Colossians 2:16-3:4

Before I share the message, let me talk with the church family about our recent prayer focus.

For some weeks I have been asking you to pray for our elders and pastors as we look to our future. Two weeks ago I asked you to specifically pray as we considered the timing of our next capital campaign which we have been planning for next February. The Elder and pastors have taken three weeks to fast and pray. During this time we did not discuss what we believed God was showing each of us. Then last Monday night we came together and each prepared to share their personal conclusions, one by one. It was a supernatural experience. Amazing. In a room full of very diverse people, men and women, older and younger, each person voiced the exact same position. The unanimity was incredible. Not only are we on the same field, we are on the same base. Not only are we all on the same page, we are on the same sentence. In different words, we all said God is taking us forward to build His church by building deep into people, but this is not the time to raise money for a new building.

The clarity and strength of this decision is obviously of God. Someday we will need to provide more and better space for our children and youth, but this is not the time. Our direction is clear: to go deep with Christ by digging deep into God's Word in our sermons and in our Life Groups. The elders and pastors have a strong passion to see us all grow deeper in our walks with God building on the great life change coming from our study in Colossians. Early next year we will move to our next book in the Bible: we will study the classic Old Testament book of Joshua, focusing on courageous faith. As we are doing with Colossians, we will study Joshua in our Life Groups so that as we draw near to God He will use us to touch many new lives with His love.

Join me as we praise God for answering our prayers so clearly with such remarkable unity.

Prayer of thanksgiving

Now let's press on into Experiencing Christ by continuing our journey through the New Testament book of Colossians written by the Apostle Paul. We are in our fifth week out of nine total messages. We have seen the clear theme of Colossians: The supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.

Today we will hear Paul tell us: Don't let religious people condemn you with their false teaching, but orient your life to Christ because you are united with Christ. The Colossians were allowing people to intimidate them with their religiosity. The same thing happens today. We have plenty of modern day religious people who add to Christ. The Colossians were feeling condemned by those who seemed so much more spiritual than they were, so much more religious. Paul had to warn them strongly.

Today I want to set you free from religious condemnation and intimidation. People try to make you feel like you are not a spiritually good person if you do not do what they say or follow their religious rules and practices.

In this Book God gives us a message of freedom from religiosity. Bad theology leads to bad practice. Our focus should not be on religion, but on the reality of Christ. Open your Bibles to Colossians chapter 2 and verse 16. This is Paul's most direct and intense warning in the book. He strongly counters the religious people who were intimidating the Colossians. Please stand for the reading of God's Word. Colossians 2:16-3:4 (NIV)

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. ¹⁹ He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. ²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³ 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. Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in

God. ⁴ *When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

Paul says do not allow yourself to be condemned by religious people or worse get caught up in their false religiosity rather orient your life to Christ with whom you are united. In chapter two verses 16-23 Paul says what we are not to do in three paragraphs that spell out three freedoms we have in Christ. For each I will help us see Paul's description, evaluation and prescription for the error. Then in chapter 3 verse 1-3 we come to the one big thing we are to do and why. Paul prayed that we would live worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in every way, but these false teachers are giving us false ways to maturity. Paul was very direct. He stepped on toes. I'm going to be as specific as Paul was so I may step on your toes today. If so, come talk with me about it.

Condemnation comes in three forms: a legalistic judge, a spiritual umpire and a religious rule maker.

Don't let religious people condemn you

Paul starts this section with the powerful connecting word, "therefore" looking back to what He has taught about Christ and our connection to Him as the all-supreme, all-sufficient complete savior. If you have missed any of the sermons, go back and watch, listen or read the sermons. All the Colossian messages are on the web site, www.mcfbc.org. [show on screen]. Paul is telling us do not let religious people condemn you. Not of course we cannot control what another person thinks, but we can stop ourselves from being affected by their condemnation and we can avoid being caught up in what they are doing. Take your sermon outline out of your Program and follow along. By the way, be sure to always bring a Bible and a pen to church. In the first of his three "don't" paragraphs Paul says,

Don't let them judge you – freedom from legalism

Legalism demands that you follow additional rules beyond what the God has clearly commanded. Legalists judge other people for not following their religious rules. In Colosse those rules tended to be about diet and days, but Christ has set us free from legalism.

Description: diet and days

Food and festivals have often divided religious people. Today religious people argue about drinking alcohol. Abstainers judge non-abstainers. I understand the pastor of a large church in DFW told his whole congregation that no one in the church should drink alcohol including wine. The Bible does not say this. You may choose not to drink for good reasons, but you should not judge others who have a different conviction. You are not more mature if you do not drink.

I asked my wife Tamara to do a quick Internet search for “Christian” diet books and plans. In a few minutes she found The Maker’s diet, the Hallelujah Diet, and others [slides]. Some promise that their holistic program will bring you a great life. Religious people sometimes insist that we should only eat organic food made by God, or eat no meat just like in the Garden of Eden, or keep the dietary laws of the Old Testament. We should follow what Paul said in Romans 14:17, the Kingdom of God does not consist in “*eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*”

Of course, dietary principles are a good idea, but strict dietary discipline is not a sign of spirituality. We are not to judge others, or allow anyone to pass a religious judgment on us, in regard to food and drink. Pp. 82 You can follow Christ fully without following some religious, supposedly Bible-based diet.

What about special days? Today some Messianic Jewish Christians insist that all Christians should continue celebrating Jewish feasts such as Passover. There is nothing wrong with celebrating them. The problem comes when we insist that there are compulsory for everyone or that it makes you more mature. That is legalism.

What about the Sabbath? Some Christians judge others because they work or play sports on Sunday. Some businesses refuse to open on Sunday. Should you follow the model of Chick Fil A’? The Sabbath was really Saturday and the command is never stated in the New Testament. While it is wise to take days of rest on a regular basis, let’s not judge each other for how we handle Sundays or Saturdays. Do not let some super-spiritual person judge you about what you do on Sunday, except of course coming to church. But does church have to be on Sunday? No, we have a Revolution service on Monday night and it is awesome. We are not commanded to worship only on Sundays. How does Paul evaluate this insistence on diet and days? He says, *These are a shadow of the things that were to come*

Evaluation: shadow

Jewish dietary laws and special days were merely a shadow cast by a reality to come; now that the reality has in fact arrived, we do not continue to focus on the shadows. As the book of Hebrews affirms Christ is the substance to the shadow of Jewish food laws and feasts: He is the reality which casts its shadow backward in time. What is Paul’s prescription?

Prescription: reality in Christ

In a dramatic contrast, he says, shift from the shadows to the reality. Now that the reality has come, there is no point in clinging to the shadows. And the reality is Christ. Why play in the shadows when you have

experienced the real thing? PP. 175 Focus on Christ, not on diets and special days. Don't let hyper-religious legalists restrict your freedom and judge you. Secondly in the next "don't" paragraph, in verse 18, Paul says furthermore,

Don't let them disqualify you – freedom from mysticism

The phrase "disqualify you for the prize" comes from the athletic arena. The picture is of a negative decision of a self-appointed religious umpire who disqualifies your faith as invalid. We encountered a religious legalistic judge, now we encounter a religious umpire who disqualifies us for not being spiritual enough.

Mysticism is the pursuit of a deeper or higher subjective religious experience. Christian mysticism per se is not evil, if its goal is a deeper knowledge of God. What we are talking about here is a deceptive mysticism which adds to Christ. How does Paul describe them?

Description: pseudo-humility, angel-worship, visions

The pseudo-superspiritual umpires are insisting on false humility and the worship of angels as well as entering into personal visions. These religious umpires were caught up in angels, maybe praying to them, maybe calling on them to protect them, to bring success in business, or to remove the effects of a curse.

Today our society is filled with curiosity and obsession with angels. Angels play roles in many movies and television series. Bookstores are filled with glittering books and dazzling calendars on angels. The angel industry has become quite profitable. Angels give us what we want without demanding much religious commitment or sacrifice in return. They offer generic, inspirational stuff with little or no religious content. Pp. 196

In addition these people were entering into private visions, religious dreams. The NIV says, "*Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen,*" Perhaps they were taking pride in paranormal or supernatural visions involving angels. What is Paul's evaluation?

Evaluation: prideful, empty

He says all their talk about religious visions is only so much hot air. They are groundlessly conceited, puffed up about nothing. All they have discovered in their so-called mystical experiences is a set of imaginary fantasies. Pp 125 Supposedly super-spiritual people can intimidate you with their mystical claims and judge you for not having these same mystical experiences.

When I lived in Plano a man took me out to lunch to tell me that he was sorry I did not have all of the Spirit. He invalidated by spirituality because I had not had his experiences. I did not speak in tongues and had not been slain in the Spirit. Do not let people insist that you have the same

experiences that they have had to be spiritually mature. Nothing wrong with spiritual experiences, but it is wrong to demand that everyone must have your experiences to be a spiritually good person.

We must not be intimidated by super-spiritual umpires who want to disqualify us because we are not as spiritual as they are. What is Paul's prescription?

Prescription: connect to the Head

Paul says, they think they are connecting to God through angels and visions, but they have in fact lost connection with the Head, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the source of growth and nourishment spiritually, not angels and visions. Don't let religious umpires try to disqualify you when the truth is that they are the ones who are disqualified if they are disconnected from Christ, the Head.

Spiritual growth comes from God through Christ as we are all connected together forming the ligaments of Christ's body. God causes the body to grow in spiritual maturity and in numerical size. There is no biblical formula for church growth. God causes the Church to grow as we are connected to the Head. A local church can grow well only as each member connects to the Head and to each other.

In verse 19, the growth is corporate: there is no thought of some members growing independently. Failure to hold to Christ undermines the body's unity and growth. Failure to connect with each other undermines our connection to the Head. We only fool ourselves if we think we can find our meaning, purpose, and significance for God through an isolated contemplation of religious truths. That comes only in a community of believers bound to Christ and to one another. Pp. 198 That's why Life Groups are so vital. If you have not been going to your Life Group, start back. It is crucial for your spiritual growth.

Don't let supposedly "super spiritual" people disqualify you by their delight in mysticism. And finally, in our third "don't" paragraph, we move from the umpire to the rule-maker.

Don't let them dictate to you – freedom from asceticism

The NIV says, *why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules*. The verb here for "submit" means to "establish or publish a decree or an edict" It is the Greek word from which we get our English words, "dogmatic and dogmatism." The hint of the Greek meaning remains in the English words. We should not let ourselves be dictated to by religious dogmatists insisting we follow their religiosity. Notice how Paul describes them in verses 21-23.

Description: rules and religiosity

This group was advocating asceticism. Asceticism is a self-denying way of life. Often this is rigorous and austere. Paul says they were engaged in self-imposed worship, false-humility and harsh treatment of the body.

In Dan Brown's bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*, he brought into the open the group, Opus Dei who wear a cliché on their upper thigh to fight lust; this device when tightened can make you bleed. Others walk on stone steps on their hands and knees to show devotion.

Today some religious people will insist on fasting or hours of meditation. Those are good practices, but are not to be imposed on all people. Some years ago Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade, did a 40 day fast and then called call Christian leaders to do the same. I did not feel that was what I should do, but I felt sub-spiritual because I did not fast for 40 days. From my study of this passage this week, I realize that I was wrong to feel sub-spiritual.

Do not allow others to dictate to you their rules and religiosity. Paul does want the Colossians to lapse into a manmade religion. In a sense he is advocating a 'religionless' Christianity. Following Christ is not just another religion with rules and rituals, but sets us free from religion as the world understands it, free from asceticism, mysticism and legalism. What is Paul's third and final evaluation? Paul writes in verses 22-23, ²² *These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.* ²³ *Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, . . . but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.* Essentially Paul is making two main points. It will perish and it is of no value.

Evaluation: will perish, no value

Things that you handle, taste and touch will perish, literally. As Jesus said, don't worry about what goes into the stomach, but what comes out of the heart. And these ascetic practices are of no value in curbing sensual indulgence. When you focus on what you will not do, it does not ultimately work. You are addressing the symptom, not the cause. The issue is not whether you comply with an external discipline, but is your heart motive changed? For Paul morality arises from being in Christ. In Christ, we not only are forgiven and redeemed by God, but are also transformed into new persons, capable of knowing and doing the will of God. Nothing less than a moral revolution was triggered by the death and resurrection of Jesus! Pp 135. So what is Paul's third and final prescription?

Prescription: die with Christ to the world forces

You have died with Christ to the world forces, so live that way. Death has severed our bondage to the powers of this world, so we do not have to engage in rigorous rituals to deal with our sin. False religious zeal is

responsible for so much spiritual misery. It denies Christians what God has not denied them. Watch out for legalists, mystics and ascetics who want to condemn you for not doing what they do. You do not have to keep some special diet or be slain in the Spirit to be a mature Christ follower. You do not have to receive visions, see angels or beat yourself to be mature.

In summary watch out for religiosity that stresses human-made rules beyond what God gives us in the Bible. Watch out for judgmental groups that see themselves as spiritually superior. Watch out for claims to secret knowledge, special visions, or interaction with angels. Any religious teaching that puts more emphasis on dreams, spiritual beings, rituals or rules than on Christ is suspect.

Don't let religious people condemn you out of legalism, mysticism or asceticism and don't get caught up in their error. Instead, move from the "don't" paragraphs that end chapter 2, to the one big thing we are to do in Colossians chapter 3.

Orient your life to Christ

Christ is the central theme. In chapter 3 Paul writes, *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.*² *Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.* Notice the complete Christ focus of the paragraph. There are five explicit references to Him in the four verses. Fundamental to our orientation is our identification with Christ in His death (v. 3a), resurrection (v. 1a), life (vv.3b, 4a), and glory (v. 4b). Based on our union with Christ to live a spiritually mature life, the one thing we must do is to

Focus on what's above with Christ

The "earthly" things are not physical, material things, because the Bible does not teach that material things are evil in themselves. Rather, the expression describes worldly things. The terms "above" and "earthly" have nothing to do with the geography of the universe; instead, they contrast two orientations.

Paul's point is not that we are supposed to think about heaven all the time, but to let Christ and the things of His realm set the values, priorities, and direction for living in the here and now. Pp 135 He gives the same basic exhortation twice: set your hearts on things above and set your minds on things above. In essence, he is saying focus on, seek, that which is of Christ.

We are to look above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. This is an allusion to Psalm 110. The right hand of God was a way of expressing strength, powerful protection, and favor in Hebrew. Christ is supreme.

To focus on and seek what is above is to be oriented by the One who reigns there and His purposes, plans, provisions, and power. It is also to view the things, people, and events of this world through His eyes with an eternal perspective. Pp 128 Christ totally reorients our lives.

Paul's point is not some mystical preoccupation with a heavenly angelic vision, but with practical and everyday-life. We are to live everyday life with the eyes and mind of Christ above. Christians are not called to escape the world but to be obedient to God within it, allowing the transcendent dimension where Christ reigns to set the priorities for our lives, to reflect on earth the very life of heaven. Our aims, ambitions, in fact our whole outlook, are to be centered in Christ. Christ is our source, center, and goal. Our heart and mind are His heart and mind. We see the world as He does.

What is the orientation of your life? Where are you focused? Your orientation will set the direction of your life. When a person completely identifies with another person or cause that can become the all-consuming determiner of their motivations, priorities and emotions. A lady in love with will orient her entire life around her new relationship. What she wears, eats and does for fun will revolve around him. Once an athlete qualifies for the Olympic games, the rest of their life until the end of the games is totally oriented by the Olympic games, preparing, competing and celebrating. They will quit their job, move to the Olympic training center and orient their life to the Olympics. Our lives are to be oriented by Christ

What orients your life? Where are you focused? If you want to live a God-honoring life, focus on Christ. If you want to become spiritually mature, orient your life in Christ. Live as Christ and for Christ, bringing a heavenly mindset to everyday practical life. The next sections of Colossians address how to live for Christ in the church, the home, the workplace and the world. Before we get there, let's look at the crescendo of truth that ends our passage today. The reason you are to orient your life to Christ is

Because you are united with Christ

Underline every use of the phrase "with Christ" or "with Him." We have died and been raised "with Christ" in the past (2:20; 3:1,3), our lives are hidden "with Christ" in the present (3:3), and will be revealed "with Christ" in the future. (3:4). We are united with Christ

In His death and resurrection

Instead of waiting to receive the resurrection life, those who have been raised with Christ possess it here and now. Our new life has already begun as the new creation is breaking into this fallen world.

Remember we are only united with Christ if we have trusted in Him. Not all people are united with Christ, not all church-goers are united with Christ. You become united with Christ by trusting in Him as your savior. If you are not sure what all that means please ask me or another leader here at the church. Once we are united in Christ's death and resurrection, we are also united in His life today.

In His life today

Paul says *our life is now hidden with Christ in God*. What an amazing truth. Your life is hidden with Christ in God, totally secure, totally safe. Today you are with Christ in God. And that is not all. We will be with Christ in the future,

In His glory to come

Look at what Paul says in our last verse, verse 4, ⁴ *When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory*. Before we talk about glory, stop your eyes on the little phrase, "*who is your life*." There is a lot packed into that phrase. Our life is not just shared with Christ. Christ is our life. Paul said in Philippians 1:21, "*For to me to live is Christ*." For a maturing believer Christ is your life. He is the source, the meaning, the purpose, the identity, and the destiny of life. Is that the case for you? Is Christ your life? Does He orient your life?

Then notice not only is He our life, but He is our hope. Christ is the hope of glory. One day He will appear in glory. We so look forward to that day, but look at the last line, *then you also will appear with him in glory*. Wow! You will share in His appearance, in the open display of His glory to all of creation. The small band of Colossian believers, insignificant expatriates from a third-rate country town, will appear in glory with Christ. Pp 133 You believers here in Collin County will appear with the Lord Jesus Christ in glory. Now that prospect can orient your life!

False teachers were condemning the Colossian Christians, telling them essentially that Jesus Christ was not sufficient, that they needed something more. We are united with Him in His death, resurrection, life and glory.

Don't let religious people condemn you with their false teaching, but orient your life to Christ. He is the answer to a full spiritual life, not legalistic rules, mystical visions or ascetic practices. What we set our minds on determines the direction of our lives. Where are your heart and mind set? A mind-set is a deliberate act of your will. Set your mind on Christ above, not on earthly things. Orient your life to Christ so that He sets your whole outlook. The song writer, Helen Lemmel, wrote,

Turn your eyes upon Jesus/ Look full in His wonderful face/ And the things
of earth will grow strangely dim/ In the light of His glory and grace

© 2006 Bruce B. Miller
McKinney Fellowship Bible Church
2801 Orchid Drive
McKinney, Texas 75070
972-547-7000
www.mcfbc.org
www.brucebmilller.com