

DIY Religion?

Like many Christians, the believers in Colossae had begun to invent rules for themselves. In **Colossians 2:20-23**, Paul bluntly says that this sort of rule-keeping is just another way of following the basic principles of the world system. And, he says, you believers do not belong in the world system because you have died to it with Christ! He challenges them to face up to the inconsistencies between their lifestyle and the reality of their new life in Jesus.

Notice that he does not say, "You **ought** to have died with Christ." Although there is an 'if' at the beginning of **verse 20**, there is no doubt in his mind about their real status. In **Colossians 1:13** he is clear that 'we' (both he and the Colossians) have been rescued out of the authority of darkness and transferred into the kingly rule of the Son of God's love. In **1:21-22**, he highlights the contrast between their earlier hostility and alienation from God and their present reconciliation and inclusion in his plans. Then, in the earlier parts of **chapter 2**, he says they have "*received Christ Jesus the Lord*" (**6**) and that they have been "*made complete*", "*buried with him in baptism ... also raised with him*", "*made ... alive together with him*" (**10, 12, 13**). If we have put our trust into the Lord Jesus Christ, then these things are just as true for us today as they were for the believers in Colossae then.

So, Paul is not expressing any doubts about these folk actually being real believers. He is really saying, "Right then, you are joined to Jesus; let's see how that fits with the way you're living!" He does not tell them what they **ought** to be doing or not doing, **he reminds them of what is actually true** and then shows them how the way they are living just does not match up with that reality. This is simple example of what he calls the "*foolishness of proclamation*" (**1 Corinthians 1:21**). Instead of going into lengthy philosophical argument, Paul just states what is true – they either respond to it or they don't! In fact, he leads into this passage in **verses 16-19** by referring to all that the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us and saying, 'therefore'!

Some people start getting upset when they find other Christians getting excited about what Jesus has done for us. It is not uncommon to hear criticism of this sort of teaching as being 'just lots of words' or 'spiritual theory'. Yet, when Paul writes to the believers in the early churches, it is to this fundamental truth that he comes back repeatedly.

He has not been to Colossae and has never met these folk but he is determined to see them established, growing and mature. What does he write to them? Not a list of 'practical suggestions for being an effective church in the midst of heathenism' but solid information of what God has done for them in Christ, so that the Holy Spirit can use his written words to build them up. See **Colossians 2:1-5**.

Because Jesus has cancelled the certificate of our debt and has triumphed over all the rulers and authorities, no-one should put us under any condemnation about religious observances of any sort such as what to eat or drink, or special days and celebrations. People come along acting like self-appointed umpires, trying to disqualify us by inventing new rules like special humility and angel-worship, based entirely on their own ideas and 'visions', arrogant without any cause because it all comes from their own natural mind. Because all their approach is from human sources and not from Jesus who is the Head of the Body, Paul issues an urgent warning:- **"don't let them do it!"**, he says.

Sounds quite up to date, doesn't it? How many times have we been made to feel second-rate because someone has come up with some new experience, some new yardstick to measure Christians by, some new teaching which 'everyone' seems to be ready to swallow? Perhaps we have seen other Christians subjected to this sort of ungodly pressure or maybe we have even joined in the dangerous game ourselves and tried to find ways in which we can measure someone else's spirituality? Isn't it amazing how often these tests seem to show the superiority of the one who invents them?

The same thing was happening in different ways with other churches to whom Paul wrote. In the region of Galatia (central Turkey), instead of making up their own sets of rules, troublemakers were getting into the young churches and trying to force new Christian believers to 'sign up' to Judaism, saying that they could not be proper Christians unless they took on all the Jewish religious trappings. The town of Colossae in south-west Turkey had much the same sort of background in heathenism as Galatia, and in **Galatians 4:8-11** Paul describes how the believers there used to worship things "*which by nature are no gods*" and had then come into relationship with the living God. Then, to his dismay, they started making themselves slaves again, not to heathen gods this time but still to the same basic principles of religious observance, closely following all the detailed instructions (under God's old covenant with the Jews) about special days, months, seasons and years. Paul was so distressed by this that he was afraid that perhaps

he had wasted his time bringing the gospel to them!

The principles were the same; believers in Galatia and Colossae faced the same sorts of home-made religion which threaten us today. Philosophy and empty deception (**Colossians 2:8**); systems of rules to bring us into slavery (**2:20-22**); groups which try to exclude others so that they will want to join (**Galatians 4:17**); all denials of the **facts** of what our Father has done for us in his beloved Son!

One of the biggest dangers can be that it all looks good, very worthy perhaps, as people *appear* to be making themselves humble and keeping their bodies under strong discipline. On the face of it, they probably look like 'better Christians' than us – whatever that means! Paul sees straight through it – yes, he says, these things have an appearance of wisdom but they are of **no value at all** against fleshly indulgence. Why not? Because they are themselves the result of natural, man-made, 'fleshly' religion. Paul calls it '*ethelothreskia*' – worship or religion connected with wanting, wishing and desiring.

In effect, this sort of 'spirituality' is doubly dangerous because it is apparently very earnest and sincere and there is little or nothing actually wrong with the things its inventors and followers promote and practise. The problem is with where it comes from – it does not have its roots in the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done. Paul contrasts it with the "*growth which is from God*" in **2:19**. That godly growth comes from each one of us (each part of the body) "*holding fast to the Head*".

'Holding fast to the Head' is something that not many young Christians are taught to do. We are told to read our Bibles and pray, to go to meetings and share with our brothers and sisters. We are encouraged to learn to do many different things and it is easy for these to become as much a ritual and routine as any Jewish ceremony or heathen practice. So little of our so-called 'Christian lives' have any real spiritual ingredient that it is hardly surprising if some people are lured into new experiences, new movements and new teachings. The promise of spiritual fulfilment is especially attractive to Christians who have had an initial experience of the living God and have then been told that there is nothing more.

Relying on either Christian routine or exciting new experience is dangerous and defective. I have nothing against Bible-reading, prayer, meetings or fellowship, nor against real God-given spiritual experiences. They are all intended to bring us to greater appreciation of the Lord Jesus, to enable us to live in him more consistently, but they are **not** worthwhile things in themselves. If we rely on any of these to succeed

as Christians, then we are falling for DIY religion, not real Christianity. It is probably because we have not really learned to live in Christ that we are so easily deceived by man-made religion.

In **chapter 3**, Paul continues to encourage the believers to fix their minds on *“things above, where Christ is” (v.1)*. We have all heard the saying that someone is ‘so heavenly minded that he’s no earthly use’. In reality, it is usually the other way round; we are so earthly minded that we are no heavenly use. The significant thing is that Paul **starts** with the spiritual realities of what God has done for us in Christ, emphasising that *“you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (v.3)*. (Again, see that he says that we have died with Christ, not that we should have died!) Then he says, *“Put to death the members which are on the earth; immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed, which amounts to idolatry” (v.5)*. That is certainly practical enough!

But what is the difference, we might ask, between the people who humiliate themselves and treat their bodies severely, which Paul says is man-made religion, and Christians ‘putting to death’ all these evil practices? Didn’t Paul himself say, *“I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified”? (1 Corinthians 9:27)*. Aren’t they exactly the same thing?

No! The person who tries hard to bring evil influences under control in their life by submitting to rules and regulations is doing it **in order to achieve their own release** from evil. Christians know that **their release has already been achieved** through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that they have died and been raised with him in new life. That is why Paul starts **ch.3 v.5** with *“Therefore ...”*! They may look very similar but one is DIY religion and the other is the freedom of learning to live *“holding fast to the Head.”* Paul’s determination to keep his own body under control was not a question of earning anything by religious practice but part of the practical result of ‘laying aside the old man’ which he talks about in **ch.3 v.9**. He refused to allow the risk that the message would be undermined by his own failure to ‘hold fast to the Head’ in the very practical way of giving in to a physically easy life.

Where is the root of our Christianity? In what we try to do or in what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us? Let us learn to lead our lives in him, **‘holding fast to the Head’!**

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