



Christ & Religion

Colossians 2:16-23

- ❑ “Religion” may be defined as “that aspect of one’s experience in which he attempts to live harmoniously with the power or powers he believes are controlling the world”.¹ Throughout history, fallen humanity has made such attempts, resulting in a variety of beliefs and practices.
- ❑ When Christ came, he claimed to be the way, and the truth, and the life (*John 14:6*). He claimed that *in Him* human beings could live harmoniously with the ultimate Power – the Creator God. Christ emphasized relationship over mere religion. Apparently, false teachers in Colosse were promoting religious beliefs and practices that were contrary to the teachings of Christ.

Content of their Religion

- ❑ After talking about the believer’s freedom in Christ (2:9-15), Paul warns the Colossians about the “religion” of the false teachers. Read Colossians 2:16-23.

1. What religious practices are being promoted or observed by the false teachers? (2:16, 18, 21, 23)



- ❑ Religious practices include food and drink restrictions (2:16, 21), special days (festivals, new moon celebrations, Sabbaths) (2:16), “worship of angels”² (2:18), “harsh treatment of the body”³ (2:23). Some of these practices (in particular, some food restrictions and special days) have background in Old Testament religion⁴ (2:16), while other practices do not (2:18).⁵

Attitudes of their Religion

- ❑ As they promote and observe their religious practices, the false teachers are revealing particular attitudes – attitudes about themselves, and attitudes toward others.

2. What attitudes does Paul mention in his warning about the false teachers? (2:16, 18, 23)

- ❑ Apparently, the false teachers “judge”⁶ others who do not follow their religious practices (2:16, 18a). They “delight in false humility” and proudly go into great detail about their religious experiences (2:18). They are “puffed up” (arrogant) in their supposed superior minds (2:18).

¹ Josh McDowell & John Stewart, *Handbook of Today’s Religions* (San Bernardino: Here’s Life Publishers, 1989), 11. This definition can apply to both supernaturalistic and naturalistic worldviews. Other definitions may emphasize psychological, social and moral functions of religion more than the idea of harmony with God, gods or other powers.

² “worship of angels” is interpreted (and translated) in different ways, but the NIV reflects the traditional understanding. Clinton Arnold notes the common practice of “invoking angels as a means to ward off evil in the ancient world in general and the geographic region of Colossae in particular” (Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 2008], 226; referencing Clinton Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism*, 61-101).

³ “harsh treatment of the body” refers to asceticism – the practice of strict (sometimes extreme and harmful) self-denial. “False humility” (*tapeinophrosunēi*) in verses 18 and 23 could be translated “asceticism” (ESV) or “self-abasement” (NASB). These ascetic practices could be leading to visions, i.e., “what he has seen” (2:18), as they sometimes do.

⁴ For example, see Exodus 20:8-10; Leviticus 11; 1 Chronicles 23:30-31; 2 Chronicles 8:12-13.

⁵ The false teaching seems to be a “syncretism” (mixing) of Christianity, local Judaism, and local folk belief. While the Jewish component has ties to the Old Testament (OT), these OT practices may have taken an extreme or perverted form.

⁶ In this context, “judge” (*krinō*) has the negative sense of “condemn” or “pass judgment” (ESV). In verse 18, Paul uses the word “disqualify” (*katabrabeuō*), which has a similar meaning.

Deficiencies of their Religion

- ❑ The religious practices promoted or observed by the false teachers are deficient at best. Some of these practices are clearly wrong. Speaking of the person who “delights in false humility and the worship of angels”, Paul says, “He has lost connection with the Head” (that is, Christ).
 3. In what ways are these religious practices deficient (inadequate or defective)? (2:17, 22, 23)
- ❑ Concerning the festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths, read Colossians 2:17. The Old Testament regulations concerning food restrictions and special days foreshadowed and pointed to Christ. Since Christ has come, believers are no longer obligated to observe them.⁷
- ❑ The false teachers’ prohibitions concern objects that are “destined to perish” (2:22). What comes out of a man’s heart is much more important than the food that passes through his body.⁸
- ❑ These practices “are based on human commands and teachings” (2:22). They are not from God.
- ❑ These practices “have an appearance of wisdom” but they are worthless in solving our real problem, which is the power of sin in our lives (2:23). Only Christ can solve that problem.⁹

Religion & Christianity

- ❑ We desperately need harmony (restored relationship) with our Creator God. It is impossible to earn this relationship by religion or other human effort. It is a gift of God, received through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are found (2:2-4).
 4. How is Christianity affected by the *addition* of man-made religious beliefs and requirements? How is Christianity affected by the misuse (or overemphasis) of religious instructions derived from the Bible or church tradition?¹⁰



Instructions to Christians

- ❑ Paul tells the Colossian Christians, “Do not let anyone judge (or disqualify) you” for not following man-made religion (2:16, 18). To be bound by such religion is to be bound by the powers and authorities that Christ has defeated. Paul says, “Since you have died with Christ to the basic principles of this world”, do not let man-made religion take you captive (2:20).
- ❑ Realize that salvation, victory over sin and death, spiritual freedom, and the fullness of the knowledge of God are found in relationship with Christ, *not* man-made religion.

Reflection/Application

- Do you sense the need to live harmoniously with the powers that control the world? Harmony with *the Power* (God) is found only in Jesus Christ. Do you need to receive Christ?
- As a believer, are you attempting to gain the approval and blessing of God (or others) by your religious performance? For a sample of “true religion” read and apply Romans 12:1-15:13.

⁷ Also consider Mark 7:19; Hebrews 8:13; 10:1; and Romans 14.

⁸ In response to the Pharisee’s overemphasis on eating with ‘unclean’ hands, Jesus said, “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’” (Mark 7:15). Earlier, Jesus quoted Isaiah, “They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” and then he adds, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men” (Mark 7:7-8, NIV).

⁹ Victory over sin is found only in the crucified and risen Christ. This is the point of Colossians 2:9-15.

¹⁰ The addition of non-biblical beliefs and practices can corrupt Christianity, and also lead to false Christianity (e.g. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons). Misuse and overemphasis of religious instructions can lead to legalism, judgmental attitudes, and unnecessary division. (“Legalism” suggests that we can earn God’s favor by obeying rules.) Please note that we should not swing too far in the other direction. Biblical beliefs, practices, and spiritual disciplines are important! However, we need to distinguish between essentials and nonessentials, and keep first things first. God wants our hearts.