

Religion versus Christianity

I recall one of the first times I ventured into the big smoke of Auckland city in my late teens – this is before I was a Christian – walking down Queen St only to hear the faint sound of repetitious singing, chanting, and the playing of tambourines and other instruments. It got louder and louder and then they were right by me, a few of their crew were handing out booklets explaining what their religion was all about.

They looked so happy, it was enchanting, many were being lured in, it was like they didn't have a care in the world; it all appeared very attractive. *Here's the thing:* that's what false religion does. There is much that is attractive about such religions, that makes people feel good about themselves, it heightens our senses to something beyond ourselves. Most appealing, religion says I set the rules. I'm in control. Right now people will be feeling quite, out of control.

What has this got to do with today's passage? There are many dangerous and seductive religions in the world today. But sadly religion creeps its way into the life of the church where it has no place. It seeds itself and puts its roots down.

The whole letter of Colossians is to encourage Christians to not be influenced by anyone or *anything* else apart from Christ. He's the only one! I hope you'll agree that now especially is not the time to *sag or lag* spiritually.

You know what it's like to drive a car with a flat front tire, you deviate in a different direction. The moment our devotion, meant for Jesus, is given to something else, or the moment we feel we've got to do or be more than Jesus has done for us, is the moment we're risking being religious.

The Christians Paul wrote to were being told Christ was insufficient, more than him was needed, his sacrifice alone was not enough. That false teaching (religion) was legalism and asceticism, now I'll explain these shortly. But Christians were being told that living and believing this way, would make up for where Christ is insufficient. And Paul says, no way, he's the only way! Christ can never be insufficient! In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. (Col. 2:9,10)

Religion versus Christianity, let me define these this way:

Who is the religious person? Someone who lives for themselves. Self-reliant. They want to reach a higher power or state of being, or their god benefits by their own efforts.

Who is a Christian? Some who has died to themselves, who lives for Christ and follows Christ only. Being Christian is not signing up for a religion. It is about being born into the family of God (John 3:3). It is a relationship.

From today's passage we'll find that we are at risk to similar religious threats as in Paul's day and what we must do to combat these.

(READ Col 2:16-23)

So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.

Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud, and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.

You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"? Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.

*Paul is addressing man-made traditions, philosophies, rules and "mere human teachings" (v.22). He says you're not to be condemned by such things because *they are* man-made and are not God-honouring. Don't follow them, they won't help you in overcoming sin. Jesus is the only one who can.

You know there are an "estimated 10,000 distinct religions"¹ in the world today: made up, invented by man. Throw in the mix the influence of all the "isms": materialism, postmodernism, humanism, relativism to name a few. We can see very quickly we live in a complicated, religion saturated, spiritually influenced world. I'm certain that right now, in the world people will be searching for something, will they find Christ?

Billy Graham once said: "Religion without a personal encounter with Jesus Christ will not save the soul, and it will not bring the peace that your soul longs for. Millions are searching for God through religion and not finding it..."²

We might think of religions and traditions outside the church when reflecting on this passage, but we are not immune by such influences. We are.

I want to look at two of those influences.

Legalism (ref. v.16-19). Let's start with by defining legalism.

- a. Legalism is trying to earn the favour of God in our strength. It is trying to be morally and ethically good before God in our strength, without any reliance on the mercy and grace of God. The legalists concern is being morally good by the letter of the law, instead of pleasing God by the state of their heart. Legalism rejects God's mercy and grace to save.
- b. The second aspect of legalism is this: making up our own unscriptural rules about Christian life and church, whereas scripture is always the guide.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion#cite_note-10. See also: <https://www.trendrr.net/8632/largest-religions-world-famous-fastest-growing-oldest-top-10-list/>
² <https://www.courageouschristianfather.com/billy-graham-religions/#axzz6GuTgRg1X>

So, trying to earn the favour of God in our strength and, making up unscriptural rules. The first example relies on ourselves for salvation, the second relies on ourselves to build the church. The church is Christ's body, not man's institution and he alone sets the "rules".

We don't see anywhere in the NT where the word legalism is used, though it is addressed in a number of places including here in Colossians. Legalism is not God-honouring, is not biblical, because it makes Christ insufficient. Like the circumcision we discussed last week. For most Jews if you'd had the operation, you thought you were in good standing with God. But what God really wanted was the *cutting off* to be reflected in a complete inward change and newness of heart. The cutting off, without the inward change of heart, meant nothing to God.

We may be surprised to hear that legalism is a sin. It could in fact be the sin that has been most prevalent in our churches in recent times. That's why Paul deals with it swiftly. His message is legalism must be rejected as something God is not honoured by. If this has a 'presence', only as we search our hearts and bring it before God, can it be reconciled.

Look at v. 16 again, Paul says "So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths..."

This was Paul's response to the false teachers forcing their influence on other Christians, who weren't prepared to follow *their* rules. Their emphasis was placed on religious performance, and appearance, as if that was the way to improve their relationship with God. Today, mantras can be chanted, rules followed, beads used to pray with, concrete statues are prayed to, there is an insistence people dress in a certain way (i.e. can't be in the band...), restrictions are placed on people, that do nothing for relationship with God.

I hadn't long been a Christian, and early into my relationship with Karyn I decided to take a Sunday (yes...) to paint the roof of Kathy's house. Now my work involved travelling from Te Awamutu to Hamilton and back daily, so I had very limited opportunities for such projects. Man did I get a hard time from one of the old fellas in the church, breaking the Lord's Sabbath by work...

We must be cautious of thinking about then imposing rules on others and the church that the NT doesn't. And the reason Paul's message to the Colossians is so strong, is he knows, God does not want legalism in the church.

Why? It denies his sovereignty and grace. *Some of us might be thinking, I hope that's not me.* I think this is a tendency we all have, we must constantly keep in check.

I should say at this point legalism doesn't mean we don't follow guidelines or God's commandments. The New Testament is full of both. Jesus said himself that if we love Him, we will obey His commandments. And sometimes we even need a few guidelines, policies and boundaries in the church in order to function healthily that aren't explicitly found in scripture, *but are scriptural*.

Legalism is not an obvious sin. But look again at how Paul describes legalists. Those whose "...sinful minds have made them proud, and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. (Col. 2:18,19).

Jesus himself had some pretty hard things to say to the legalists: What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make

one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are! ...What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith (Matt. 23:15, 23).

I know of a young man who is a very talented musician, and in a previous church of ours was part of the music team. After one particular service a gentlemen came and told me that he'd "had *a word* to this young fella about his demeanour on the stage, that he had to look more interested in worshipping God, otherwise what was he doing there". Now I certainly haven't held a grudge, but that is not cool. I said to this guy, "how about you go and tell him how much you appreciate him and maybe that will give him the lift he needs". You know that young fella has never played in church, since then...

Legalists are very good at pointing out the specks in others, when they have the logs! Very good at confronting others issues while their own remain unreconciled.

How do you know if legalism is creeping into your heart?

- Listen to the way you talk about others when they're not listening
- Listen to the way you talk about the church and your expectations of the church
- Do you judge people by their external appearances, a book by its cover?
- Is your heart for God and his holiness, different to what others see?

Reflect on those questions, get right with God where you need to (*READ Ps. 86:11*). God is honoured by exclusive devotion to Christ.

Asceticism (v. 20-23)

Paul is talking about denying themselves of certain things which the Bible does not forbid. Asceticism is a strict self-denial. And it is a means of personal holiness that seeks to earn favour with God. i.e. the more self-disciplined I am, the more holy I make myself, the more God will be pleased. It is a substitute for Jesus and it is a denial of his grace.

Gandhi, apparently stopped having sexual relations with his wife. Then, to prove he had self-control over his urges, he slept in the same bed with other women, but never touched them. In history Christian monks have gone to extremes for their spirituality, sleeping on boards, exposing themselves to extremes of heat and cold, not having a bath, fasting, and celibacy. All in an attempt to deal with the temptations of the flesh. That's just two examples. The world is full of religions where people do or don't do for self in order to please their god. But, it doesn't do anything. It can't change our hearts and doesn't deal with our sin.

Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. But our High Priest offered himself to God *as a single sacrifice for sins*, good for all time....for by that *one offering* he forever made perfect those who are being made holy. (Heb. 10:11-14)

Self-discipline is not wrong, but it must be first motivated out of worship for Christ and does not replace or deny his grace.

Religion (Legalism and asceticism) is aimed at obeying manmade commands. Christianity is aimed at obeying God's commands. Religion attempts to earn God's favour by following

rules and regulations. Christianity operates from knowing that God has accepted us in Jesus Christ on the basis of His grace. He alone is enough!

Christianity

Their sinful minds have made them proud, and they are not **connected to Christ, the head of the body**. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it...You have died with Christ, **and he has set you free** from the spiritual powers of this world. (Col. 2:18b-20)

False Religion is disconnection from Christ. Anyone who is involved in or practices the forms of spirituality that Paul was addressing are disconnected from Christ. Why? Because they're not him!

Billy Graham said: "...you may be a member of some other religion...catholic, Jewish, Hindu, whatever your background...you may not have any religion. I'm not asking you to come to a particular church. I'm asking you to come to the person of Jesus Christ."³

Relationship is connection with Christ. And that connection with Christ means we're part of a body that grows and is nourished. It's a living body.

Devotion to Jesus means following no one but Jesus

What an odd thing to say, of course that's the case. But the people at Colossae were following the rules, the shadow, they loved the shadow, the shadow that pointed toward Jesus, but wasn't Jesus. They *worshipped* the shadow, not the real Jesus.

We might find the idea absurd and laugh at them, but we need to recognise how easy we can do the same. It's easy to worship rules, worship prayer, worship serving, worship the bible, worship tradition and styles of singing, but these are the shadows, they have nothing to do with worshipping Christ. Jesus the person, not the rule, is the one we follow.

When we're able to worship together, whether that's in our small groups, in our homes, remotely by ZOOM or other means, these are times for being refreshed and awakened in our relationship with Christ. But so often we get distracted by '**how**' we do this, rather than '**why**'. The '**how**' is what Paul was addressing with the false teachers. And let me tell you it's the '**how**' that usually moves people on, because it's the how that offends people's expectations.

What happens when we put less energy into '**how**' we worship and more into '**why**' and '**WHO**' we worship? Our eyes are on HIM, not on others, not on the rules...

Do you know God takes the state of our hearts seriously? We can give the appearance we are fully engaged in prayer and worship and serving, but it all can be a show? When we do that we're following the ritual. Folks, we cannot fool God.

Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me. As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting-they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings. I hate your new moon

³ <https://www.courageouschristianfather.com/billy-graham-religions/#axzz6GuTgRg1X>

celebrations and your annual festivals. They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them! (Isa. 1:13-14)

Bible says, “search me O God, know my heart, test me” (Ps. 139). You could make that a personal prayer to *audit* how your devotion to Jesus compares to other loves’ in your life, he will show you...

The false teachers were so caught up in religion and rules they missed the real Jesus. What *shadow* are we following instead of Jesus? What do we love more than Jesus? *Devotion to Jesus means following no one but Jesus*. And...

Devotion to Jesus means being part of the body

The false teacher’s sinful minds had made them proud, and they weren’t **connected to Christ, the head of the body**. (Col. 2:18)

If we’re not connected to Christ we’re not part of the body, if we’re not part of the body of which Jesus is the head how can we be connected to Christ? The body, is HIS body.

Being a part of his body is more than attending church or going through the motions of Christianity, that’s religion. *In his body* means joined to Jesus in a living way. We’re not at him, or sometimes joined to him, but “in him.” In him as members of His body. If Jesus is the head of us the body, what does the body do? What the head wants it to do. What does the head want the body to do? Live for him, only.

E.g. Over the years I’ve had people come to me and say I’ve prayed about ‘this’ and I believe there’s no need for me to resolve that issue or forgive that person. That’s their responsibility. That’s not The Head speaking, that’s our head! One thing to “pray” about something but be certain it lines up with the word.

I hear stories all the time about Christians who have left the church because they couldn’t find the best preaching, or the right worship, or they were ticked off with someone. And there they often stay. Sad!

A good friend told me once that church is like a milking shed. The most productive shed, is when all the team are working hard, the cows have come through, the vats full, which also means there’s a lot of “mess” left in the yard.

The *why* must be more important than the *how*. Jesus holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it. What this means is that being Christian is not an individual matter. It is about being part of a functioning, *messy*, body. And that body only grows through dependence on the head (Jesus) and interdependence on each other (the body). Working through issues, yes sometime big ones, but dealing with our hearts, first. You step away from that; you’re saying I don’t need the body!

Getting our minds off the world, off ourselves and onto Christ, is the way we grow. The *how* is taken care of by the *why*. When we focus our eyes and minds and hearts on Christ, first, all the rest follows. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

We don’t have to be lost in religion and the religious influence of the world when we can love Christ, and Christ only. Religion lives for self. Christianity lives for Jesus, that’s where we need to be headed.