

A la carte Christianity?

I have to say I really miss you. I miss seeing you on Sundays. You can see me but I can't see you. I miss being in worship with you. I miss hanging out in the fellowship area and chatting about the week over cookies while the little kids are running around. I am afraid the kids will be adults by the time I see them again. And one of the things I miss the most are the meals together. The potluck lunch downstairs and the church picnic. I love potluck. You end up with a choice of ten different dishes and sandwiches, homemade Pakistani food, eight different salads, and about 20 different desserts. And First Pres does food well. I think it was one of the Kosierowski boys that when asked what church he went to he answered "the church of food." Taffy will have to correct me if I have that wrong. But needless to say potlucks together are awesome. You get to pick and choose from dozens of foods when if you were at home you would make just one. When it comes to food, lots of choices is a treat. But when it comes to Christianity, lots of choices can mean disaster.

And that is what was going wrong in the church in Colossae. Up to this point Paul has been making it clear who Jesus is and what Christ has done and how it should change us. Now he reveals the reasons why he had to emphasize such things. In the part of this letter that we get to today, we find out more specifics about what was going on in the church in Colossae. They were picking and choosing how to be Christians. They were adding and subtracting to what was required to live as a Christian. Now, to be fair, the early Christian church lived in confusing times. They were trying to be the church that followed Jesus, but their surroundings were an odd mix of continuing Judaism, paganism, and Greek philosophy. Confusing times. Maybe not so different from right now. So let's read about what Paul was upset about.

Scripture: Colossians 2:16-23

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. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. ¹⁹ They have 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 elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely 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.

Colossians 3:1-4

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."

So, the main problem here was that the believers in Colossae were adding to the requirements for being a real Christian while at the same time trying to show off and not follow Christ, which is what a real Christian does. And Paul outlines three major problems. One, there was this pressure to follow Jewish diet and calendar laws as a requirement to follow Christ. Paul runs into this often with Jewish believers mixed with Gentiles. Remember that whole argument about circumcision? How the Jewish believers thought that the Gentile believers would now need to be circumcised and Paul says “no.” That is the old covenant. You don’t need that anymore. Jesus’ death and resurrection, that is the new covenant. That is all you need. Well here again the Jewish believers are trying to impose food laws and festival laws on the new Jesus followers. They are adding to the requirements to be a Christian and Paul is having to remind them again, “no.” Christ is all you need. You don’t need these extra rules to follow Jesus. These other requirements won’t save you. Jesus is the one that can save you.

Do we add requirements to followers of Christ today? I think we may even when we have good intentions. When I was a child we always went to church dressed up. I always had to wear a dress or skirt. I had my patten leather Mary Jane shoes. On Easter you had a hat or bonnet. And if someone had walked into our church in jeans on Easter Sunday, they would have at the very least gotten some dirty looks. Perhaps even some comments. Are certain clothes a requirement for following Christ? I don’t think so. They can be a sign of respect, but wearing the right clothes won’t save anyone. And I think our church is less strict on clothes than the one I grew up in. But I think we still have tendency to add to what it means to follow Christ. For ourselves and for others. When the going gets rough we tell ourselves we have to fast more, pray harder, or punish ourselves. And what Paul is saying is that Christ has done everything you need. No human rule will get you closer. He writes in verses 16 and 17 “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.” So let’s not complicate Christianity. We like to complicate things with rules and creeds and special events and traditions. They can all be good things, but our focus need to stay on Christ because that is the only one who can save us. None of those other things save us.

The second problem Paul addresses is people showing off their piety by doing visible things that made them look humble, when they were doing exactly the opposite. Humility being a personal goal rather than a means to submit to God. Humility is important in the Christian life, but it has to be for the right reason. And in the case of the church in Colossae people were apparently being humble in order to show off. To show how good they were. That would be the wrong reason. Paul writes in verse 18 “¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.” I love that. “Puffed up.” Have you ever met someone who is puffed up? We can probably all think of an example right? Someone who is really impressed with themselves? Someone at work? Someone at school? A “know it all” in your family? We can all probably think of someone that is puffed up pretty easily.

But what about you? What about me? Have we ever been puffed up? Have you ever been spiritually puffed up? Have you ever gone to church for the purpose of being seen at church rather than just worship? Have you ever started the day with a devotion and afterwards said to yourself, “there I am a good person, I started the day with a devotion.” We are all tempted to prop ourselves up spiritually. It is also called pride.

The great British preacher Charles Spurgeon shared this. After his sermon one Sunday, Spurgeon was met by a woman who exclaimed, “Oh, Mr. Spurgeon, that was wonderful.” “Yes, madam,” Spurgeon replied, “so the devil whispered in my ear as I came down the steps of the pulpit.” Spurgeon had it right. Genuine compliments are no sin, but he knew that puffing God’s people up with *pride* is one of Satan’s favorite tactics. One reason the enemy uses this trick so often is that it is so successful. In this case it is the preacher. Right? We are all tempted to puff ourselves up spiritually. And that is what Paul is warning against. It was a temptation for the church in Colossae 2000 years ago and it is still a temptation for Christians today.

Then the third issue Paul addresses is the worshipping of angels. This may sound strange to us, But then it was common to invoke the power of angels in that culture for protection. The attraction is that angels might be more accessible than Christ. So, Paul is making clear that Christ rules over the angels. They don’t need to invoke angels, just Jesus. You don’t need any other power. Today we don’t generally have a problem with looking for the power of angels, although we do need to recognize that they are real. But they are under Jesus. Jesus is the real source of power.

The question is, do we seek the power of Jesus, or do we seek power in other things? Power is a chronic human problem isn’t it? Where do we look for power? We look to education. We count on money. We like to be connected to important people. I was invited to a luncheon at the governor’s mansion a few years ago and I have to admit I felt pretty important when I got to the door and my name was on the list and I was welcomed in. The feeling of power is so tempting. But did having lunch with the governor contribute anything to my salvation? No. Paul wants us to remember that real power comes from Christ. That is the power we need to rely on. Not earthly powers, but God’s power. The great British General Booth said that “the greatness of a man’s power is the measure of surrender.” Power comes from surrendering to God. The Colossians still lived in the world, but they needed to live as if the world had no power over them.

So, these three problems that the church in Colossae was having all stemmed from trying to craft their Christianity by looking in all of the wrong places. They were adding requirements to be a Christian, they were acting pious for the wrong reasons, and they were looking for power in the wrong places. And as I said earlier, they were picking and choosing from a mishmash of beliefs. They had Judaism, the local pagan culture, and the Greek philosophy of the time which was really popular. And they wanted to pick and choose what they liked from each one and make it their Christian religion. I call this a la carte Christianity. We want to be followers of Christ, but we like some teachings more than others. And we like a lot of what the world offers us as well, so we try to balance living in the world and following Jesus. We pick and chose what being a Christian looks like for us. This is what the Colossians were doing and this is something we still do. And it is dangerous. And here is why.

One, when we start making up the rules, we start judging the people that don’t follow our rules. One commentator put it this way. We become “emotionally elated, ego inflated, and worst of all, brother berating.” We become judgmental and selective. We create rules that tighten our circle of who is acceptable and who is not. And this is exactly the opposite of what Jesus taught and lived. What happens is we end up worshipping the rules rather than Christ. This is why Paul spent so much time preaching on the primacy of Christ in the first chapter. Christ is central. Christ. Not the rules. Not the rituals. Not the customs. Not the traditions. Christ is the focus.

Paul was concerned that the ideas of the day diminished the primacy and centrality of Christ. This has not changed today. Lots of things compete with our Christianity and want to gain supremacy in our lives. When this happens a lot of things can creep into our churches and ministries that do not belong there. It can shift our focus and put more emphasis on things that are perishable and non-essential to faith in Christ.

Another danger is getting puffed up like Paul warned. David Garland writes “obedience to rigorous rules may earn one a reputation for holiness, but it is ultimately ineffective in dealing with human sinfulness...we can compose a list of observances - things we believe God requires or will admire – and comply with them to the letter. But such obedience does not make us more devoted to God.” We may think we are doing good and looking good, but we are not growing in a relationship with Christ.

And lastly the big danger is that a la carte Christianity puts us at the center rather than Jesus. It is what we want, not what Jesus wants. All of these good things the world talks about: self-discipline, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-fulfillment; what do all of those words have in common? Self. They all sound good in the world that we live in, but they take Jesus out of the center and put us there instead. We become disconnected from the head which is Christ. Paul says this in verse 19 “They have 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.” We can’t be the head of the church. Christ must be the head of the church.

Paul is trying to remind us that no set of rules can offer salvation, no spiritual practices can offer salvation, and the worship of anything other than Jesus cannot offer salvation. And the church should be the place where Jesus as the head is most evident. That is how we are to be different from the world. That is why we cannot adopt bits and pieces of the world and add them to Christianity. It is only by following Christ and putting him at the center that we can find spiritual nourishment and be the church that God intends for us to be.

So how do we do this? Well, the opening of Colossians chapter 3 that we read tells us. “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.” Paul states to set both heart and mind on things above. We are in this world still, but our values should come from the world above. No a la carte Christianity. In the church we have to let go of worldly values, worldly rules, and worldly things. We still experience the things that happen in this world of course. We still have to make enough money to have a place to live. We still have to deal with a pandemic. We still have to get out there and vote. All of those things are part of living in this world. But Paul is reminding us that we have another world to be part of. That our focus should be on Christ, who is currently at the right hand of God, and in whom we are completely secure. This world cannot take our salvation away from us. No power in this world is greater than the power of Christ, who is the head of the church.

So, do we still live in this world? Yes. But being part of the body of Christ and being saved through Jesus Christ means as Paul said “we are raised with Christ.” We have something much better than what this world can offer us. We have salvation. So don’t practice a la carte Christianity. Don’t try to pick and chose parts of life with Christ and parts of life in the world. Rather set your sights on the world above, the one that is planned for you. If we do this as a church we can live out what God wants to do through us. Will we stand out and look different? I hope so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.