

Colossians 2:16-23 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Colossians 2:16-23 | Self-Made Religion

We are still in the heart of Paul’s main argument for the Colossians which can be stated in his simple yet deeply profound exhortation earlier in this chapter.

Colossians 2:6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.

This brings us to one of the premier difficulties with Christianity many people face, which is Christ’s claims of exclusivity. This is related to the incarnation itself. That God became a man and dwelt among us to atone for our sin by his death. The full revelation of God is not an idea, or a shared vision, or inner quality lying dormant within each of us, but is one particular person, Jesus. This is referred to as the scandal of particularity.

At the heart of this scandal however lies this incredible paradox. The radical exclusivity of Christ being the way, the truth and the life is paired with this almost unimaginable inclusivity which is that Christ is offered to all free of charge no qualifications required. The necessity of Christ which we find offensive is paired irrevocably with his all sufficiency. And today in his call for us to hold fast to Christ, Paul vehemently defends the sufficiency of Christ against any who would add some other regulation, qualification, or necessity.

If we walk in Christ as merely necessary but not sufficient, that is if we only incorporate him into our understanding of our lives and don’t rather completely orient our lives around him, then we have misunderstood Christ. It is no longer Christ we are dealing with at that point but merely a self-made religion. And any of our self-made religions only maintain and reinforce our bondage to sin. In Christ alone our hope is found. This means that it is only in Christ that we find our hope, and it is in Christ only that we find our hope.

1. Exclusion

Colossians 2:16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

As I've shared before one of the difficulties in interpreting Paul's letters is that we only have his letters to the churches and not the churches letters back to him. This means we must infer the particular issues the church was facing based upon the instruction that Paul gives them. At the same time however we must understand scripture is sufficient for our understanding of life and godliness. In the Bible we lack no evidence which we would require to know Christ. So although we only have one side we have all we need.

Paul's encouragement here to the Colossians is one that will sound deeply resonant with our culture. One of our primary values is to not judge one another. But if we consider it only that way it isn't really something that we can do. I mean, how could you let no one pass judgement on you? It's impossible to police other peoples actions, and he certainly isn't encouraging us to shame others around us into total support, nor is he teaching us to not care about one another's holiness. This type of judgement is not just about harboring certain thoughts, it is about *exclusion from the community of faith*.

It is likely that many Jewish converts were saying to new Gentile converts that their disregard for the patterns of Jewish worship were evidence that they were outside the community of faith. The Jews were given these patterns of being to demonstrate their separation from the nations around them as the people of God. You know this is ordinary because it is not just that we have holidays because we view ourselves as a community but that we view ourselves as a community because we have holidays. Otherwise why do you fight with your in-laws about where you're having Christmas?

But this particular list is informative; *food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath*. In all other texts in which this particular triad is mentioned the subject is **“not the individual worshipper's offerings, nor his personal acts of worship on those days, but the system of official sacrifices to be made for all Israel.”**¹ Their was a sect of converts who were saying that in order to be a part of this Christian community you need to mark yourself off as part of this community through our Jewish practices. Is it not the case that *you* gentiles are being grafted into *our* promises? But everything has changed now that Christ has arrived. Here is Paul's analogy.

Colossians 2:17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ

¹ Frame, John. The Doctrine of the Christian Life, 571.

All of those rituals and days and patterns of atonement which were played out religiously for millennia by the Jewish people were but a shadow. A shadow gives an outline, a silhouette of what is to come. Perhaps by a shadow we could recognize a person, but once the person has arrived we do not attend to the shadow. Are these restrictions, feasts, and festivals, even circumcision itself permissible? Of course! Paul does not demand that the Jew no longer be a Jew, nor the gentile no longer be a gentile. But that these practices are not the markers of exclusion they once were. All of us, Jew and greek are only united in Christ.

2. Disqualification

Colossians 2:18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

The word to pass judgement has to do with inclusion and exclusion, here the word disqualify is a word used by an umpire to rob someone of a prize. Sure you might have come in through Christ, one might say, but in order to achieve true salvation you must be qualified. Perhaps by radical self-denial you might be able to come in contact with the angels. In these states you will be able to perceive visions of the reality that is beyond and learn how to participate in them. Paul calls into question such practices and calls them becoming puffed up without reason by your own sensuous mind.

Is Paul saying that there is no spiritual world outside of Christ? No. Is he saying that there is no reality of self discipline? Of course not. But he is saying that the only thing which qualifies us before the Lord is Christ himself.

Puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind. Okay let's talk about psychedelics. I have several friends who have had life changing experiences through psychedelics, it's once again a mainstream conversation. It is a fact of reality that you can have incredible experiences by asceticism, fasting, and particular chemicals that are deeply impactful and transformative. These are in the category of religious experiences, it is in fact common to say that through psychedelics we can create religious experiences.

But the problem with simply receiving that as a good, is that the religious experiences themselves have no framework in which to be understood and incorporated into our lives because the only way to establish a framework for life is to establish what is at the top of the hierarchy worth pursuing and what is at the bottom worth avoiding. The experiences themselves no matter how profound become only self-referential and likely tools of justification for our own wicked minds. And this is precisely what Paul says.

Colossians 2:19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

The way that we order our lives is not by our own ecstatic insights but by holding fast to the head, who is Christ. It is from him and him alone that the body is nourished and grows and holds together and if anything else becomes the source of our connective tissue that will be the very thing that pulls us apart. Now it doesn't have to be psychedelic, it can be just the pursuit of mystical experiences and then the trust that these pave the way forward. It takes incredible discernment to handle a religious experience and that is only found in Christ.

So look at what Paul is showing. The religiosity of the jews tears the body apart, the elevating of religious experience above christ tears individuals apart. Sure these are a part of life but they are meaningless and useless apart from Christ.

3. Self-made Religion

Colossians 2:20-22 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?

Once again Paul is saying you have forgotten the story. The truth of the matter is that you are in Christ. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world why are you submitting to regulations? This means granting things which literally experience destruction in our very use of them, (food and drink) an authority over our eternity.

Colossians 2:23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

There are so many opportunities to add to our faith in Christ something which we create and then use to convince ourselves that we are wise and humble before the Lord. But here is Paul's severe and absolute statement. These are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Your appearance of wisdom leads only to pride and denigration of our Lord. Your severity to the body only replaces what once might have been self-indulgence into self-made religion. The flesh is satisfied with either.

You know what the flesh hates? Christ being the Lord of your life. Our flesh hates the idea that we can't save ourselves and that we need to be rescued. The flesh hates the idea that it might not receive credit for your salvation. And here is our hope, in Christ we died to the flesh. Let all attempts at saving yourself die with Christ.