

Colossians 2:16-23 – Don't Chase Shadows

Michael Horton wrote a book entitled “Christless Christianity”. **Christianity** without Christ is “ianity” or more appropriately “insanity”. Pastor Mark read a portion of the book and I blurted out “Colossians”. The Colossians had not removed Christ from Christianity, but they seemed to have put Christ in the background. Paul reminded them that Christ is always first in **Christianity**. The Colossians were exhorted to walk in Christ and to be rooted and built up in Christ (2:6-7). They were filled / complete in Christ (2:10). They were spiritually circumcised in Christ (2:11). They were buried with Christ and raised with Christ (2:12). They were made alive together with Christ and forgiven all their sins (2:13). The Colossians needed to grasp these truths to guard against false teaching which focused on “self-improvement” and human regulations and not on Christ.

Read Colossians 2:16-19.

Based on verse 16 what were the false teachers telling Christians they needed to do? What food and drink commands do Christians need to obey? What special days do Christians need to observe? Do you think the false teachers were encouraging the Colossians to observe the Jewish sabbath or the Christian sabbath? (2:16)

How did Paul categorize the Jewish food and drink restrictions along with the Jewish feasts and special days? The second part of verse 17 literally says “but the body [is] of Christ”. ESV has a good translation, “but the substance belongs to Christ”. Paul paints a picture of someone following a shadow and not the actual person. If I handed someone some money and they tried to take the money from my shadow, they would come up empty. Still following the shadows when Christ, the reality, is present is as vain as someone trying to get money from a shadow. The false teachers encouraged the Colossians to chase shadows in place of walking and living in Christ. The OT shadows pointed forward to Christ. Some prefer to say that Christ, come in the flesh, has cast his shadow back into the OT. (2:17)

Verse 18 is a challenging verse. The first challenge is the meaning of the word which ESV translates as “asceticism”. NKJV and NIV have “false humility”. NASB (1995) has “self-abasement”. What do you think was meant by this word? What were the false teachers pushing? Worship of angels is best taken as the angels being the objects of worship. Can you think of any similar teachings in the church today?

The KJV and similar versions have something like “things which he has **not** seen” while translations like NASB and NIV have something like “visions /what he has seen”. ESV has “about visions”. The KJV and similar versions include the word, “not”, based on a manuscript variant. A manuscript from about 200 AD does not include the word “not” as well as two other manuscripts from the 4th century AD. Verse 16 appeared to focus on Jewish regulations. Does verse 18 focus on Jewish traditions or Greek traditions, or both? Why are these people puffed up without reason? (2:18)

Based on verse 19, what was the end result of their asceticism, worship of angels and visions? Instead of what the false teachers were engaged in, what should the Colossians do? Where does spiritual growth come from? What are some ways that Christians seek spiritual growth apart from Christ?

Read Colossians 2:20-23.

In verses 12-13, Paul said that the Colossians were buried with Christ, raised with Christ and made alive together with Christ. Verse 20 mentioned another “with Christ”. What else had they experienced “with Christ”? How do the “elemental spirits of the world” relate to verses 16-19?

What regulations were the false teachers pushing on the Colossians? What do you think these regulations referred to? (2:21)

Based on verse 22, what was the problem with the regulations of verse 21? How does this characterization of the regulations help to identify what these regulations were referring to? (2:22)

These regulations had an appearance of wisdom but were they really wise? What do you think made them appear to be wise? (2:23)

Were these regulations and practices effective in achieving spiritual growth and preventing sin?

What are some practices today which Christians engage in which have an appearance of wisdom but are actually ineffective to achieve real spiritual growth?