

Let's be honest. The world sees Christianity as a religion that restricts and dictates what is appropriate and what is not. They perceive it as set of rules and regulations for life – a religion of “do’s” and “don’ts.” To some degree, this assessment would be true, in that we are bound to follow the Word of God. And on many points of spirituality and morality our Bible is indeed restrictive, as God has set down guidelines for His children to follow for our good. Any loving parent does the same for his child.

But the world's view of a restrictive and dictatorial Christianity is mostly unfair, founded on a false perception that Christian churches and their leaders teach mostly what followers cannot and should not do. Yes, this is a misperception of what God's church should be, but sadly many churches and leaders through the centuries, and even today, do much to foster and feed that misperception. And when we do, the heresy that attacked the Colossian church comes to attack us again in our church of today. “Shadow” comes to hide the “substance” of true spirituality.

“Beware” says Paul. Don't be deceived. You are complete in Christ. He is the head and Lord over all. (2:8-10) Let us heed his warnings as we examine our Scripture passage of the day.

**Colossians 2:16-19** *Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by this fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.*

At this point, let me offer my “C.U.P. Version” – Craig's Unauthorized Version:

*No one should be your spiritual judge as to what you can eat or drink or on what days or seasons it is appropriate to worship. All these concerns previously were only shadows of the substantive reality of what has now come full in Christ. Likewise, no one should be stealing the joy of your salvation by claiming you are missing out on a greater spirituality. Such would want you to find greater reward in denial of pleasures and pursuit of deeper spiritual reality, all because they claim to have seen visions which their fleshly minds have concocted. But they have not held fast to the true head of the church – Christ Himself – from whom the whole body is held together and nourished by God for healthy growth.*

### VERSES 16-17 EMPTY RELIGIOSITY

The point of verse 16 is clear. Restrictions on foods and worship observances under the Mosaic Law are not for New Covenant children of God. The shadow of uncertainty has past, and the reality of the fullness of Christ has come. So, for the Christ-follower, all foods are pure and all days belong to God for worship.

**1 Timothy 4:4-5** *For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.*

The “therefore” or “so” that begins verse 16 clearly relates this truth to the previous, which is the victory of Christ on the cross and over death. Christ's triumph is our triumph over the former spiritual regulations of diet and worship. We are free to eat what we want and worship as we please with no spiritual restrictions. Our only “restriction” would be the wisdom of the word of God, encouraging moderation and prudence when appropriate.

If a Christian brother chooses to keep a kosher diet, or fast, or observe the sabbath or season of Lent, he is free to do so. But he must not judge another for not doing so, and he must not think

that he is any closer to God for doing so. He must do so believing that God wants this for him, but not necessarily for another.

*“It would be preposterous indeed for those who had reaped the benefit of Christ’s victory to put themselves voluntarily under the control of the powers which He had conquered.”*

F. F. Bruce

Now these verses speak specifically of what we eat and when we worship. But the greater principle extends beyond such restrictions. Through the ages, “judges” have arisen to tell us what is appropriate for us as Christians and what is not, beyond what the Bible makes clear.

Clearly, God’s Word tells us not to lie, or steal, or covet or a host of other sins. But when judges arise to add to or interpret in light of their own opinion or prejudice, the Colossian heresy repeats itself. How often have we heard through the years that that these are harmful, or even Satanic?: card playing, dancing, smoking, rock and roll music, drums, movies. And some would also include on this list dating, holding hands or kissing before marriage. Or also included would be the length of skirts that should be worn, or the colors of fabrics that are appropriate or the length of hair that is acceptable for a Christian, or the acceptable musical instruments for worship.

We learn that the interpreters of the Mosaic Law came up with 600+ laws to follow, and we cringe at such a burden put upon the people. And yet, we in our own interpretation of God’s Word sadly often place a similar burden upon our children and ourselves when we make the Scripture teach a stringency of what it was never meant to convey.

Most of us recall the cults of Hare Krishna or Urantia or the Church of Scientology that captured the hearts of many of our young people – all promising a pathway to God through secret, special knowledge that only their leaders could bring. Through chants, separation from the world and self-sacrifice was said to bring a higher spirituality. But in truth, all such cults brought was an empty religiosity that ended in everything from disappointment to death.

But it doesn’t take joining a cult to bring about meaningless religion. It can happen in any church on any worship service, including our own. When we mouth worship lyrics that we do not embrace as our own, are we not engaging in empty religion? Or when we turn our mind off and let it wander during a gospel message are we not doing the same? Or if we just pretend to pray silently as others pray aloud, are we not engaging in an empty spiritual ritual with no meaning? When this occurs, we have fallen into the shadows of religion rather than into the substance of spiritual relationship with the God of the universe. And God wants us to emerge out of the shadows and embrace the full relationship with Christ that makes us truly complete.

Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians would be his prayer for any of us who dabble in the shadows of faith and need to encounter the fullness of relationship with Christ.

***Ephesians 3:17-19*** *Oh, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.*

Surely God is not fooled or pleased by our “punching the time card” of being in church. Then church only becomes boring and soon viewed as a waste of time when one is only going through the motions. God despises and resents mechanical worshippers. He seeks those who will truly worship Him in Spirit and in truth – meaning by the power of the Holy Spirit in and through them, and with sincere transparency of authenticity.

Oh, may we flee out the shadows of empty religiosity, and into the completeness promised and found only in Christ!

## **VERSES 18-19 – MYSTIC SPIRITUALISM**

We see the two primary characteristics mentioned as (1) self-abasement, or false humility and (2) deeper spiritual reality, such as worship of angels. The Gnosticism of Paul’s day believed that one must seek for God through spiritual exercises and putting self aside. We see the

rebirth of this ancient heresy reborn in the New Age Movement (which emerged in the 1970's and has been among us in various forms since).

The "self-abasement" or false humility of putting oneself aside, really turns into a focus on one's self in discovering one's full potential. The New Age Movement tells you that everything is already there inside of you. "The Light You Seek Is Your Own Lantern" is one of their popular slogans. You can see the diabolical influence in that this lie has so much of God's truth in it. We who have the Holy Spirit living in us DO have everything we need inside of us in the person of the Spirit. We are complete with Christ in us, our hope of glory. But these heretics teach that the full potential within us is ourselves! In other words, they teach that we are the god of our own destiny. You now see the similarity of truth in this diabolical lie.

The music group "The Firth Dimension" used to sing "this is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius" from which the New Age movement gets its name. Whitney Houston used to sing "To love yourself is the greatest love there is." Groups that seek to help you find yourself in this way are: Esalen, Eckankar, Est, Transpersonal Psychology and Transactional Analysis. Most of these are still active in California – especially on the coastal cities such as ours, and found on most college campuses. These groups have evolved from Buddhism, Hinduism and Yoga – all Eastern mystic movements.

But beyond this brief history of spiritualism, at the very heart of it is that spiritual truth can be found within oneself, apart from any God of the Bible. Anytime someone tells you that there is a "higher consciousness" or "deeper level" you must seek, beware! Contemplating your navel, chanting or holding physical poses will not advance you to a higher or deeper spiritual consciousness – at least not one aimed toward God!

Many times these mystics will claim that they have seen angels, or visions, supposedly giving them credence as a spiritual guide. But if they have indeed seen an angelic vision, the Bible teaches they have seen a fallen angel – a demon. Having seen visions, such mystics puff themselves up with pride in their spiritual accomplishment, and would have you attempt to attain their spiritual status. Beware, believer! You are complete in Christ!

Verse 19 bears our close attention:

**Colossians 2:19** ... he has 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.

Here is the "Ephesians" version of what we have been studying in Colossians 2.

**Ephesians 4:14-16** We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Paul would beg us, as he begged the Colossians: "Never, ever lose sight of the truth that Christ alone is the head of the church. And He alone is the One who is the source of all truth and the One way to God the Father." When we lose connection with the Head – either by neglect, or by busy-ness or by seeking spirituality elsewhere – we fall into error and lose fellowship with God and access to His power and guidance.

So follow not the "shadow" of empty religiosity nor mystic spirituality. Follow the Substance of Savior Jesus! Beware the shadow and seek the Substance!