

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Evangelicalism's Epidemic of False Worship" (Colossians 2:18-23; Psalm 29:2)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/22/2012

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Today we continue our study of the Holy Spirit's warning and exhortation to the church that we find in Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. I hope that you will follow along in your own Bible if you are able. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head [that is, to our Lord Jesus Christ], from whom all the body [that is, all members of the true Church], nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:18-23)

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A Strong Imperative

The inspired words that we have before us, given through the Apostle Paul, are given to us in a particular form. Paul begins with a strong imperative statement: "Let no one cheat you of your reward."

Obviously there is a reward, and Paul has given us a clear picture of the believer's reward throughout chapter one and on into chapter two. The Christian's reward is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Jehovah says to Abraham in Genesis chapter fifteen, verse one, "I [Myself] am your shield, you exceedingly great reward."

The Christian's reward is all that Jesus Christ is, all that He has done, all that He is doing, and all that He will yet do.

Jesus Christ is God Himself, the fullness of the Godhead in a body, the Creator, the Savior, the Head of the Church. The very fullness of the wisdom of God. The true source of all wisdom and knowledge.

Jesus Christ is the One who has reconciled us to God the Father because we have been crucified, buried, and raised with Him. Saving faith must have an object, and Jesus Christ is the object of true saving faith.

Jesus Christ is the One who is now at work to reconcile all things to Himself, and in a great day to come He will renovate and restore this sin-cursed creation as the eternal dwelling place of believers.

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Proverbs chapter eleven, verse eighteen tells us that "The wicked man does deceptive work, but he who sows righteousness will have a sure reward."

And in that spirit Paul says, "Let no one cheat you of your reward." Let no one cheat you of the things that are yours because of your position in Christ. These people are attempting to bring things into the life and thinking of the believer, and into the life and thinking of the church, that place barriers between you and Christ.

These people are attempting to bring things into the life and thinking of the believer, and the life and thinking of the church, that are of no value for the believer's and the church's true need, which is to be armed and equipped for the warfare of the new man against the old man, the warfare of the Spirit against the flesh.

Imposters in The Church

And there are those who will try to do this. They will try to bring in these useless things. They will try to place these barriers between you and the true Christ. And here the Apostle Paul describes such people, so that believers will be able to readily identify such people when they seek to subvert the church.

He describes their efforts to usurp the authority of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture. He describes their false humility, their focus on the flesh, their appearance of wisdom when in fact the things that they promote in the church are alien to the wisdom that is found in Christ and His Word alone.

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He describes the position of these people – they are not holding fast to the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ. They are seeking to establish their own headship.

He describes the nature of the religion they seek to promote. It is "self-imposed religion" – more literally, self-made religion. Counterfeit religion.

Dear friends, Scripture makes a critical fact about these people very clear, and it is a fact that most Bible-believing Christians unfortunately refuse to face. The fact is this: The people who insist on insinuating and promoting these things into the Evangelical church are counterfeit Christians. The people who seek to establish counterfeit authority, the people who promote counterfeit worship, are counterfeit Christians. Now that may sound to you like a very strong statement. And it is. But it is what Scripture says.

In Second Timothy chapter three, verse thirteen, Paul warns Timothy that "evil men and imposters" – spiritual swindlers – "will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."

And just a few verses later, in Second Timothy chapter four, Paul warns that "the time will come when they" – professing Christians, people in the visible church – "will not endure sound doctrine." Literally, they will not put up with it.

And so, Paul says, "according to their own desires" – not the commandments of God – "they will heap up for themselves" false teachers. One false teacher after another after another. "They will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned

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aside to fables." They will listen to the counterfeit doctrinal inventions of men and women who are not Christians at all.

The Imposters' Counterfeits

And what kinds of doctrinal inventions will they try to bring in? Paul says that they will do it in at least four ways. They will try to establish counterfeit authority in place of Christ's authority. They will try to establish counterfeit worship in place of the genuine worship of God. They will try to introduce counterfeit mediators in place of Christ, the one Mediator between God and man. And, they will try to introduce counterfeit revelations in place of the genuine revelation that we find only in the Word of God.

And in view of all this, Paul asks a rhetorical question in Colossians chapter two, verse twenty. A rhetorical question is a question to which the answer is obvious. Paul asks, "If you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves" to these people and the counterfeits they seek to bring into the church? And the obvious answer is that there can be no good reason, no valid reason, no Godly reason, for permitting such people to influence the church or permitting their falsehoods to enter the church.

Dear friends, nothing could be more relevant to the need of the church in all times, in all ages. And at the present we in these studies are focusing on the evil of counterfeit worship. We have seen how relevant these warnings were to the Colossian church at the time Paul wrote to them. We have seen how relevant these warnings have been as

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we look at the history of the church, and especially as we see the manifold evils that have been brought into the worship of the visible church by Roman Catholicism.

And today, we move forward to consider how relevant this passage is to the Evangelical church in the present day. Dear friends, in our time it is not too strong a thing to say that the Evangelical church is saturated with the evil of counterfeit worship. So-called worship that is really not worship at all. So-called worship that is in fact an offense and an abomination to God.

In our day, the Evangelical church is doing exactly what men attempted to do in Colosse, and exactly what men have succeeded in doing over the long and tragic history of the Roman Catholic church. Today, men and women are bringing the thinking and the practices and the trappings of the unbelieving world into the church. They are putting a so-called Christian label on them, and they think that this makes such things acceptable.

Dear friends, it may make such things acceptable to some people in the unbelieving world. It may make such things acceptable to those who are not born from above. But it does not make such things acceptable to God. It does not make such things acceptable for Christ's true Church. God has not changed. His standards have not changed. His Word has not changed. The nature of true worship, as we find it in Scripture alone, has not changed.

The theological term for this tragic development in the Evangelical church is syncretism. Syncretism. Syncretism is religious compromise. Syncretism is the un-

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critical, un-discerning, un-questioning acceptance of beliefs and practices that are contrary to the Word of God. Syncretism is the mingling of worldly and even pagan beliefs and practices, the mingling of those evil counterfeits, with Biblical Christianity within the church.

Syncretism is one of the methods that Satan most often uses to lead a Biblically sound church into eventual apostasy. What begins as a subtle mingling of truth and error in worship often ends with the total abandonment of the Gospel, often ends with a wholesale desertion of Christ and His Word. We see many examples of this in the church in our time. It has been so increasingly now for many decades.

But in our time the problem has reached epidemic proportions. It has reached the point where many churches that were once sound in the faith are hardly worthy to be called churches at all. In many places today, what were once sound churches are no longer the gatherings of the true saints of God for the true worship of God. They are social clubs. They are self-help gatherings. The so-called worship services are nothing but entertainment productions. But they are no longer churches.

And many new gatherings are appearing on the scene today that call themselves churches, but in fact from day one they are not churches at all. They also are social clubs, self-help gatherings, and entertainment facilities.

In fact there is now, and has been for several years, a very popular magazine called *Church Production*. *Church Production*. The idea behind this entire magazine, and other publications like it, is the idea that the so-called church service should be a stage

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production in which people are entertained and emotionally manipulated in the same way they would be if they went to a rock concert or a Broadway show. Dear friends, that is not worship. It is an abomination to God.

One of the principles that is articulated and declared to us here in the end of Colossians chapter two, is the principle that you cannot bring anything you want out of the unbelieving world and into the church, incorporate it into the church service, and call it Christian worship.

Contemporary Evangelicals' False View of Worship

But dear friends, we live in a time when much of the nominally Evangelical church rejects everything I have just said, and much more.

We live in a time when evil men and imposters have convinced large segments of the Evangelical church that what counts in worship is not the pursuit of holiness but the pursuit of pragmatism.

We live in a time when evil men and imposters have convinced large segments of the church that what counts in worship is not what God says in the Bible, but what man says in the latest how-to seminar or book about what "works" in growing a church numerically.

We live in a time when such counterfeit Christians have convinced large segments of the church that man has changed, and so worship must change. Dear friends, man is

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still the same sinner he has been ever since Eden. Man has not changed, and what's more, God has not changed.

But we live in a time when such counterfeit Christians have convinced large segments of the church that the Bible is not specific about God's requirements for worship.

And so they have succeeded in deceiving large segments of the Evangelical church into calling things "worship" that are not worship at all. And so, as Peter warned in chapter three of his second epistle, in verse sixteen, "untaught and unstable people" are twisting the Scriptures on the issue of worship and other vital matters of doctrine, to their own destruction, and to the destruction of many churches and many souls.

Biblical Worship: An Issue of Sound Doctrine

Dear friends, the people who have deceived large segments of the church into believing that God is not specific about His requirements for worship have either simply not read the Bible, or else they have deliberately chosen to ignore it or twist it. From the very beginning of the Bible all the way to the end, from Genesis to Revelation and everywhere in between, we find clear and repeated declarations and specifications concerning worship that is acceptable to God. And just as importantly, we find clear instruction about that which is not acceptable to God in worship.

The Word of God deals with both sides of the subject so fully and in such detail that there can be no question about the mind of God on the matter of worship. Biblical

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worship is a matter of sound doctrine just as much as the doctrine of the Trinity, just as much as the doctrine of the holiness of God, just as much as the doctrine of sin, just as much as the doctrine of the atonement.

The doctrine of worship is not a secondary doctrine. It is front and center throughout the entire Word of God. The only way you can miss it is if you decide not to look for it. God has redeemed a people for Himself for the very purpose of receiving their sanctified worship.

And what are the keynotes of that worship? We find one keynote in Psalm twenty-nine, verse two, and again in Psalm ninety-six, verse nine: "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." We find another keynote in Jesus' own words in John chapter four, verse twenty-four: "God is a spirit," Jesus said, "and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth." Truth unmingled with falsehood.

God's Word tells us very clearly, and repeatedly, that true worship is worship that is untainted by the influences of the world. That must be the constant goal of the people of God in their worship. Truth unmingled with falsehood. Truth unmingled with the things of the flesh. Truth unmingled with the things of this fallen world-system that is under the sway of Satan.

"Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." Holy worship, sanctified worship, worship that is set apart from the thinking and the practices and the trappings of the unbelieving world – that kind of worship, which is the only genuine worship, is a

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beautiful thing in the eyes of God, and it should be a beautiful thing in the eyes of every believer in Christ.

And the corollary to this is that anything that we may choose to call worship that is not truth unmingled with error, that is not worship in the beauty of holiness, of set-apartness from the world – those things are unacceptable to God as worship.

The gathered saints of God individually and collectively, are to be clean vessels, clear channels, glorifying God and communicating His truth. Lifting up and exalting not themselves, not performance, not atmospherics, not emotionalism, not ritualism, but exalting our great God, and His infallible Word, and His Son Jesus. No aspect of worship is a performance to please or to impress or to manipulate men, because we are not the audience. God is the audience for all true worship.

A Proper View of God, And Ourselves

Dear friends, we have much more to say on this subject, but let me leave you with one final thought today. The God we worship is a holy God. He is a consuming fire.

A proper approach to God involves a proper view of ourselves. A Biblical view of ourselves. We are absolutely unworthy of the least of God's favor apart from the merits of Jesus Christ. We are in every sense the objects of God's grace in both the present life and the life to come. This was the realization of Isaiah in his great vision of the throne room of God in Isaiah chapter six, beginning at verse one:

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In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 6:1-5)

And lest we think that such a vision of God is only to be found in the Old Testament, let me remind you of the Apostle John's vision of the Lord Jesus Christ on His throne at the end of time, at the end of the book of Revelation, in chapter twenty:

And I saw a great white throne, and Him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. (Revelation 20:11)

God has not changed. God is still holy. Christ on His throne is still holy. Much of the problem in what is falsely called worship in our time is the lack of reverence for God, for Christ, for His holiness. Such lack of reverence is absolutely foreign to the

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Biblical doctrine of worship. True Christian worship is an act of deep reverence, as we approach the throne of the Holy God of the universe.

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