

Colossians Series: Jesus, and... Col. 2:6-10, 16-23 7/18/21

A number of years ago, I spent about a month in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, teaching a course on Christian ethics in the Presbyterian seminary in Merida. Since we didn't have a car, Roger Aviles, a long-time friend who is on the staff of Accion Ministries, drove us around. On one trip we took, he talked with us about how Christianity came to the Yucatan. The Roman Catholic faith first came with the Spanish conquerors, and was imposed on the Maya population. But they didn't want to abandon their own native religion, afraid of offending their many gods who needed to be appeased by various sacrifices, including human sacrifices at times.

So, they mixed their old religion with the new Roman Catholic religion, a practice that continues to this day, according to Roger! And it's a real problem, because such a mixed religion wasn't and isn't anything like the Christian faith taught in the New Testament.

You might be wondering what this has to do with our study of Colossians. Well, all was not perfect in the Colossian church. Even though there had been growth in faith and knowledge, some new teachings were being mixed in that Paul believed threatened their faith. Listen as I read from chapter 2, beginning in verse 6.

⁶As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as

you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. (Col. 2:6-10)

In several of the ancient churches to which Paul writes, he expresses concern that they are straying from the simple message of the gospel that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been made right with God, and through his Spirit have everything we need to live as God intends us to live in this sin-hardened world. Here, Paul warns them not let anyone “*take them captive through philosophy and empty deceit*” based on “*human tradition*” and the “*elemental spirits of the universe.*” That last phrase is a difficult one and we’ll come back to it later, but for now it’s clear that the Colossians are no longer trusting in Christ alone, but were beginning to rely on other stuff, too. Paul warns them against this. He gets more specific about it in the following verses.

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling

on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking,¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations,²¹ "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"?²² All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings.²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence. (Col. 2:16-23)

Paul lists a whole litany of things that false teachers were telling the Colossians were necessary for them to have a vital faith. Some of them- like the kosher food restrictions and observance of holy days- were based on the Old Testament requirements for God's people- requirements that Jesus said were no longer binding! Paul says that these rituals were only a shadow of what was to come, that they pointed to and were fulfilled in Christ. But some of the other regulations and requirements came from other sources- self-abasement and the worship of angels, visions, and strict ascetic rules, for example. And then there's another reference to those "elemental spirits," we read about in verse 8.

There are a number of possibilities for what these “elemental spirits” are, but one of the most intriguing is that they refer to the stars! Everyone in the ancient world consulted the stars, from the poorest slave to Caesar himself. It was believed that the stars controlled our destinies and were connected to the gods. But, if Jesus is Lord of all, as Paul has repeatedly asserted in this book, the stars and the gods connected to them have no power over us and do not need to be consulted or appeased. Paul says that all these things- these rules, rituals, and quasi-spiritual practices- are of no use in the Christian life. And that they have no power to help us behave the way God wants us to behave!

It appears that some of the Colossian teachers took a salad bar approach to religion; You take a little Jesus, a little Judaism, some pagan mystery religion, and a bit of astrology, mix it all together and Bob’s your uncle! Paul says that is not only nonsense, in that there are inherent contradictions in these diverse beliefs, but that it is harmful because it leads us away from trusting fully in Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit in our hearts. It’s what I like to call the “Jesus, and...” approach to Christianity, which says we need Jesus and something else. Like Paul, I think this is a dangerous way to go.

The problem of syncretism (as this is called) goes all the way back to God’s people in the Old Testament, who frequently wanted to take their

faith in the Lord and add a little idol worship to it. The prophets strongly warned them against it. Because it not only affected their worship, but also influenced the way they lived.

Now, I doubt any of us wrestle with the exact problem of the Colossian Christians, tempted to adhere to rules based on strict Jewish legalism with some pagan philosophy thrown in. No one has wandered into my office struggling with those issues. But I wondered what we might be tempted to add on to following Jesus. What do we believe is necessary in addition to Jesus, if we want to be spiritually whole, if we are to live satisfying lives, if we want to be good people?

So I asked our staff for their ideas about this at our staff meeting this week! Someone mentioned that some Christians believe you need to have certain flashy spiritual gifts, like healing through your touch or speaking in tongues, in order to be a real Christian. Back in the late 1960's and early 1970's the charismatic movement swept through portions of all of the major denominations, including our own denomination. Many of these charismatic Christians insisted that every Christian needs to speak in tongues as proof that they are really filled with God's Spirit. This teaching was so volatile that it split entire churches. But Paul, who believed in speaking in tongues, would not have supported it! He taught that God has given each of us different spiritual gifts, and besides that, Jesus is

sufficient! We don't need "Jesus, and certain spiritual gifts" to be whole Christians; We just need Jesus!

Another staff member suggested political affiliation- that to be a real Christian, you need to also be a Republican...or a Democrat! In some churches that idea is strongly implied, or boldly stated in some cases. In this hyper-partisan time, many people are finding their sense of identity in a particular political party or person. And they believe all Christians need to espouse their point of view. Jesus and (name your political party!). Paul would say no. The problem with "Jesus and..." is that the "and" eventually takes over.

In this case, we know that all political parties and politicians are flawed. Rather than holding fast to them no matter what, Jesus wants to help us discern where those flaws are and give us the courage to speak out against them.

Here's another example of "Jesus, and..." I grew up in a mostly fundamentalist church that said you needed to follow Jesus AND avoid alcohol, tobacco, and dancing! And they regularly judged people's Christian faith by how well they did in following those rules, in spite of the fact that Jesus never said a word about any of them! Funny how serious sins like greed and gossip managed to avoid the fundamentalist sin list in my childhood church!

Or, maybe it's Jesus and money. Think of the "Health and Wealth" preaching that's so common among TV evangelists. Or, Jesus and country. That somehow God is an American, or at least supports America more than any of the other 195 countries of the world. That seems unlikely, and leads to the kind of "My Country Right or Wrong" nonsense that keeps us from becoming a better country! Some in the South used to think that you needed Jesus and support for the Confederacy. Some still do! You get the point.

Paul says that Jesus is Lord of all. That means that we follow Jesus Christ, period. All of the "ands" that we mentioned fall under the Lordship of Jesus and his critique of their strengths and weaknesses, their virtues and their faults. His kingdom and its values are decisive and final. What Jesus says, goes. Everything else is evaluated by how well it advances Jesus' work in the world.

For Paul, this is good news! It means that we are no longer subject to a bunch of human-made rules and regulations and philosophies that we have to follow if we want to impress God and one another. He appears to want to shout, along with William Wallace in *Braveheart*, "Freedom!"

So, what are you tempted to add onto following Jesus, as if it is necessary for your salvation, or for being good, or for having a fulfilling life? Can you let Jesus critique even that thing which is so important to you?