

“Religious Pressures on the Christian Faith”
Colossians 2:8-23

February 23, 2014

SI: The portion of Paul’s letter that we are about to read is his most focused attack on this set of ideas or teachings going around the Colossian church. It’s a hard passage to understand, even for Bible scholars.

There are different approaches to preaching this passage.

One approach is break vs. 8-23 into a bunch of sermons—four, six, eight—and to move through Paul’s argument thought by thought.

There is a lot of sense in that approach.

These verses are full of teachings that deserve their own sermon.

But we’re not going to do it that way.

We’re going to read Paul’s whole argument from start to finish.

And then I’m going to explain it and apply it with a very broad brush.

INTRO: I'm going to start this morning by reading you something that seems out of place for this time of year. It's a parable about Christmas.

As I read it, you'll very quickly get the point it's making about Christmas. But I'm going to use it to make a broader point about the Christian faith itself.

Long ago and far away, there lived a man named John Beresforth Tifton, a man whose teeming wealth stretched beyond the farthest dream, a man with the strange habit of bestowing \$1,000,000 on unsuspecting individuals of his inscrutable choice. Mr. Tifton would dispatch his secretary—Michael Anthony, with briefcase in hand—to deliver not only this bountiful gift of money, but legal papers showing that the selected individual had been formally adopted into Mr. Tifton's family and given his name. First dozens, then hundreds, and finally thousands all over the world received the benefactions of John Beresforth Tifton. In his will, Tifton instructed his executors, that from the incalculable holdings of his vast estate, this practice was to continue down through the years. Thousands upon thousands had their lives transformed by Mr. Tifton's generosity.

As years passed, the people who had received the gift decided it would be a very good idea if they could get together in groups around the world to celebrate the birth of their great benefactor. A few people overheard that a party was in progress and slipped in un-noticed. They didn't grasp all that was going on, but they did pick up the idea that somebody had given wonderful gifts to these people who in turn were celebrating that deed. The party crashers thought it was a good idea, so they told their friends. Soon non-Tiftons began to celebrate Tifton's birthday too. After all, it occurred in the middle of winter, a very drab time of year, and the celebrations brightened things up a bit. Before long, almost everyone was celebrating Tifton Day. It became a national holiday. The department stores and other entrepreneurs liked this new holiday and were quick to put it to use for their profit. They advertised their "Tifton Specials" and people bought this merchandise. Then came the Tifton card, then even the Tifton tree.

One Tifton Eve, two gentlemen from Mr. Tifton's far-off land disembarked from a ship in New York harbor. They were genuine Tiftons, and as they walked down the gangplank, one said, "Would it not be wonderful if we could find one of the Tiftons who lives here, one who has received the gift, with whom we could celebrate our benefactor's birthday tomorrow?" The other replied, "Ah, yes! But in such a large land as this, it is highly unlikely that in so short a period of time we should be so fortunate."

But as they walked down Fifth Avenue, they came upon a department store window which said, "Only one more day until Tifton." As the two started to go into the department store to meet the owner, they heard somebody cry out from the street, "Merry Tifton!" Startled to find a second Tifton so soon, they turned to pinpoint the man when from their side of the street cried back, "Merry Tifton to you!" Before they knew it, a whole chorus of voices was shouting, "Merry Tifton and a Happy New Year!" The two gentlemen could hardly believe their ears. "Certainly", one said to the other, "Mr. Tifton has been very generous with his gifts in America, unlike anything we have ever seen in his own land." As the two gentlemen made inquiries to one person on the street, they were invited to a Tifton Eve celebration that night.

The celebration was in full swing at a large home when the two Tiftons arrived. They heard the tinkling of glasses, loud laughter and music. They asked a man near them, "Excuse us please. When did you receive your million dollars from Mr. Tifton?" "My million dollars? I had to borrow \$500 to buy my Tifton presents this year! What are you talking about?" Finding yet another man to speak to they asked, "Excuse us, sir, but could you tell us why you are celebrating Tifton?" "Why am I celebrating Tifton? Everybody celebrates Tifton. I've celebrated Tifton all my life. I was brought up that way. My mother celebrated Tifton, and her mother celebrated Tifton. It's an old tradition around here. Then the two gentlemen heard a knocking at the door. When no one answered, it opened, and in stepped the descendant of secretary Michael Anthony, briefcase in hand. The two friends looked at each other with amazement and joy. At this very party, someone was going to receive the gift. At least one person would come to know what Tifton Day was truly all about.

Mr. Anthony said, “Excuse me, please,” but nobody paid him any mind; the music was so loud he could hardly be heard. Trying to talk over all the laughter and hubbub of the party, he spoke again: “I beg your pardon, but I have here with me . . .” His voice was drowned out. He stepped up to the closest man, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, “Pardon me, sir, I represent . . .” The man interrupted, “Hey, Mac this is Tifton Eve. We don't do business on Tifton Eve. Come see me on Monday morning. Here, have a drink and celebrate. Merry Tifton to you!” Saddened by the disrespect he had received, and without further ado, Mr. Anthony turned and left unnoticed as he entered. No one received the gift. The Tifton celebration went on undisturbed.

I'm sure you get the point. Nothing wrong with most Christmas traditions in themselves, but when they take over and become the main thing—they push the celebration of Christ's incarnation into the corner.

What we have in this section of Paul's letter is a warning to Christians not to let religion take center stage in their lives—individually or as a church.

By “religion” I simply mean anything you do as an expression of your faith—any activity, any old tradition or new practice, any teaching or ritual.

Because when religion becomes the main thing,

it will push faith in Christ, dependence on him, obedience to him into the corner.

You will be cut off from the root and source of godliness, which is Jesus himself.

In the Colossian church there were a whole bunch of different religious practices that were being advocated as the way to fullness in the Christian life,

Do this, follow this. This is what this church needs. This is what we need to get to a higher level. This is the way to an authentic, real, dynamic spiritual experience.

Some of these practices seemed very biblical. They were things Jewish believers had done for centuries, they had weight of tradition. Even Jesus did these things.

Others were the latest spiritual fad. They were so goofy and obviously pagan, that the Colossians shouldn't have looked twice at them.

But they were popular ideas in the culture of that time, so they seemed reasonable.

Paul says: Listen to me. Don't get captured by these things. Don't be taken in.

Don't let the people who advocate them browbeat you, or guilt-trip you, or make you feel like inferior Christians.

You already have all you need. You have fullness in Christ.

You have all the amazing benefits of his life, death, and resurrection.

If you make any of these religious practices, good or bad, the main thing, you will not move to a higher level in the Christian life, you'll be stunted.

And it's something believers have struggled with throughout church history—and it's no different today.

Let's look at this passage under three questions:

1. What kinds of religious pressures do Christians face?
2. Why do Christians feel religious pressure?
(Why do these things appeal to us?)
3. How can Christians can resist religious pressure?

MP#1 What kinds of religious pressure do Christians face?

The striking thing about this passage is that there were so many different things being pushed in this church. And they were coming, not just from different directions, but even from opposite directions.

And it's this fact that religious pressure comes from opposite directions, that makes us so susceptible. You'll see what I mean by opposites.

Notice that some of this religious pressure came from inside the church, and some came from outside the church.

In the first century, most believers were Jewish. Church had a strong Jewish flavor.

Even in mostly Gentile churches, Jewish believers were looked up to, listened to, because they knew the Scriptures. Because Jesus was the Jewish Messiah.

Some in church were saying: You Gentile believers got saved by faith in Christ.

But if you want to move to a higher level, must be circumcised, keep ritual laws. Paul shoots that down. You've been circumcised in Christ.

On the other hand, some religious pressure was of Greek and pagan origin.

It's all these references to philosophy and secret knowledge.

It was commonly believed that the way you move to a higher level spiritually is by getting into the deep, secret things that nobody else understands.

There were pagan versions of that called the mystery religions.

And apparently, Christianized versions in the church.

Deep Bible studies only for the privileged few, perhaps.

Paul mocks that. Puffed up, unspiritual, idle notions. Lost connection with Christ.

Another opposite: Some religious pressure came in the form of prohibitions and some came in the form of requirements.

There were those who prohibited eating or drinking certain things.

Paul says, Don't let anybody judge you, based on what you eat or drink

He quotes their rules: Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!

Those prohibitions don't do one bit of good in making you a better Christian.

On the other hand, there were others who pushed specific requirements.

You have to celebrate this or that religious festival, New Moon, Sabbath.

Probably, the Sabbath reference meant it had to be on Saturday.

Paul was not impressed with those requirements either. He called them shadows.

Some religious pressure came from traditions, some from novelties.

There was the appeal of Jewish law and practice, based on the Old Testament.

It had the weight of centuries behind it, and all the glory of temple worship.

On the other hand, there was all of this Greek stuff and mystery religions, which were the newest, most relevant, cutting edge spirituality.

One more: Some religious pressure came from practices that were dead wrong, and some from practices that are matters of Christian liberty. Paul mentions the worship of angels, and following basic principles—which most Bible scholars think refers to some kind of channeling spiritual beings or astrology.

That's just plain wrong and weird. Doesn't take rocket science to know that if a Christian follows that path to spiritual enlightenment, going to crash.

But on the other hand, Paul criticizes practices that we usually call matters of Christian liberty.

These are things that are not required, but free for Christians to do or not do, depending on their own, personal conscience—like fasting, like special holy days, even like circumcision, OT food laws—all Paul practiced at various times.

The difference was that in the Colossian church, some were saying these were not personal choice, but absolutely necessary to get to the higher level.

Here's the point: Religious pressure, the pressure to make certain practices or programs the necessary key to spiritual advancement comes from all directions.

That means we're all susceptible. Because we all have our particular bents.

Some of us love tradition and ritual, some of us love novelty and innovation.

Some concerned world doesn't influence church, some church relevant to world.

Some of us better at criticizing, guarding, some better at accepting, supporting.

Some of us have a weakness toward spiritually goofy stuff, some have a weakness for making things that are matters of Christian liberty requirements for all.

That means we are all susceptible to elevating particular religious practices—and making them essential to the Christian life in a way that only Jesus and the cross are essential.

I'm not a novelty guy.

You're never going to get me turned on by the latest conference or book or Christian movement or make me think that's what the church needs.

But I could be tempted by someone who argues that this tradition, or that historic practice or system is the key to spiritual fullness.

Some of you have opposite tendency. We need each other.

That leads to the next point:

MP#2 Why do Christians feel religious pressure?

(Why do these things appeal to us?)

You can look at the church 2,000 years ago, you can look at the church today and at every point in between, and you will find example after example of believers who fall into this trap.

No one intends to minimize or marginalize Christ.

They start out wanting to push themselves and their church to a higher level. But sooner or later this program of spiritual advancement, the steps themselves, become the major focus, and Christ and the cross recede into the background.

It's sincere. But it lacks the very thing that matters most—

faith in the work of Jesus and total dependence on him for what we need.

So back to this question: What's the appeal?

I'm indebted to Dr. Robert Rayburn on this point. Five reasons in his sermon.

1. Pride. We resist the idea that we are helpless and dependent on God. Emphasizing a particular religious program as the key puts us in the driver's seat. It's something that we can do.

There was a popular conference speaker several years ago who produced enormous notebooks with principles that covered virtually every situation in life. It was all backed up with Bible verses and citations.

Although his motives were good and most things he said were true—

the program implied that all you had to do was apply the principles and the steps. But Jesus says, Without me you can do nothing.

2. Pride. We are always looking for ways to judge ourselves better than others. If we scratch below the surface of religious programs, we will often find an appeal to spiritual elitism, rather than genuine Christian humility, longing for holiness. I don't have to look any farther than my own tradition to see this at work.

Reformed folks have often been guilty of making theological precision the key. And what is often lurking under the surface is spiritual elitism.

It feels good to be theologically superior to Arminians.

I once heard an old Presbyterian minister say that when some people become Calvinists, you need to lock them in a room for 10 years.

3. The appeal of zeal. Let me read you Rayburn's words on this point:

I have discovered this new principle. I have found this new approach to be life changing. This is what you need; this is what every Christian needs. This is the solution to our problems. The lack of this is why the church is weak. If only Christians would get on this bandwagon the

church would advance with great power and speed . . . How many times have we heard something like that just in our own lifetime. That's the way we advertise things in American culture in our day. Everything is revolutionary—from the new car to the new Christian book . . . (This is) the genius of the Devil who disguises himself as an angel of light and who can promote a false form of zeal and make it terribly impressive.

4. The difficulty of real Christian faith and life.

Growth in godliness both as an individual and as a church is long, hard labor.

It's fighting the good fight. It's running the race.

It's a lifelong walk with Christ through many dangers, toils, and snares.

So when someone says: Here's a simple key. This is it. Jump on it.

J.I. Packer's autobiography, he tells how as a young Christian he began to realize how hard it is to fight sin, and he bought into the higher life movement.

Promised fullness—called it sustained victory over sin.

Key was to "Let go and let God." Don't struggle. Consecrate self to God.

Got him nowhere. Same churned up, immature young man.

Famous turning point. Discovery of Puritans, John Owen. Mortification of sin.

Christian life is a fight to the end. There are no shortcuts and silver bullets.

5. Conformity. Rayburn's point is that the religious programs that become popular in the church very often help Christians fit more comfortably into the culture—or they help us fit into a little Christian sub-culture.

American culture in our time is indulgent, sexually promiscuous, and therapeutic—so religious programs in the church that emphasize accepting people just as they are, or that minimize theology, or accommodate the culture are going to appeal.

The flip side is that in some conservative Christian sub-cultures, the key is

Separation from the culture. Even criticism of the church and institutions.

Read some literature a while back, movement arguing that the reason for the

decline of the church in America is youth groups. Revival is getting rid of them.

Strong worship of the family over all as the path to fullness.

Here's the thing about all of these: Every one diminishes the centrality of Christ.

They make the important point of the Christian life, for individuals or the church something besides his incarnation, his suffering and death, his resurrection.

They turn to religious practice for power rather than the power of his life to deliver us from sin and raise us to new life, and to enable us to walk in love and obedience.

That brings us to the last point, which I'm sure is obvious by now.

MP#3 How can Christians resist religious pressure?

Jesus. By asking yourself the penetrating question:

Does this make me more dependent on Jesus?

Paul says, in verse six, that studied last week:

Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him.

Rooted and built up in him.

He says in these verses:

In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

You have been given the fullness of Christ.

You were circumcised in him. You were buried with him. You were raised in him.

You were baptized in him. God made you alive with Christ, forgive you in him.

The judgment of the law against you was nailed to the cross with Jesus.

And on the cross, Jesus triumphed over all your enemies.

He is not the shadow, he is the reality.

He is the Head, from which the whole body grows and is supported.

You may not understand what all of those statements mean,

but the cumulative point is clear.

Fullness is found only in Jesus Christ. Without him we can do nothing.

He not only suffered and died for our forgiveness.

He also died to deliver us from the enslaving power of sin.

And he rose from the dead to raise us to new life.

And he is present by his Spirit to enable us to walk in love and obedience.

Every religious thing we do as Christians, whether Sunday worship or private acts of devotion or Bible study or acts of service and mercy useful only insofar as they promote our faith in Christ, our dependence on him, and our obedience to his commands.

So the next time someone tells you with great enthusiasm

that you need to read this book—

that it will revolutionize your understanding of the Christian faith.

Or you need to come to seminar to learn new things about communion with God.

Or join this group to discover how to make real progress in Christian life.

Or restore this practice or ritual to revive the church—

Your bologna meter ought to start going off.

It is certainly possible that they will have useful things to tell you.
But if they are truly useful they will simply be fresh ways or fresh reminders
of how we live depending on what Christ did for us on the cross.
And depending on him right now by his Spirit.
And looking forward to what he has promised to give us in due time.

Anything that in any way detracts from that
and does not promote a Christ-centered life is just one more bad idea
that is making its rounds in the Christian church.

The poet Christina Rossetti said it well:

None other Lamb, none other Name,
None other Hope in heaven or earth or sea,
None other Hiding-place from guilt and shame,
None beside thee!

Let's keep it that way.