

SECTION 6:

Through many dangers 3: Protection from 'isms'

Colossians 2: 16 - 23

2:16: Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

18: Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.

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.

20: Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?

22: These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.

23: Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Having warned the Colossians of danger from deception, or false teaching, Paul now alerts them to another. This time the danger is distraction caused by focusing on aspects other than those which lead to life.

The Colossian church was surrounded by a number of philosophies and practices which influenced life and conduct. These philosophies posed a challenge for those following The Way. They were to steer clear of these deceptions and distractions and stick to the narrow path. So Paul continues to warn them of the dangers that they were facing.

In this passage these can be summed up as:

1. ritualism,
2. mysticism, and
3. legalism

Let's look at each in turn.

1. Ritualism

Some time ago I spoke with someone who hadn't been a regular at church for many years. He said that in the meantime nothing had changed much. The format was just the same as it was when he was last here.

There is, of course, a comfort in the familiar: we like what we do; that is why we do it! Habitually doing things in the same way is part of human nature. Indeed, we often find ourselves in difficulty if we don't do certain

things in particular ways.

For example, we can find ourselves feeling guilty if we don't go through a particular ritual in our daily devotions, or uncomfortable if our order of service isn't the same.

But, rigidly following routine procedures, although it can be good in itself, can become a danger. The procedure and its familiarity take over and are given an emphasis and importance they don't merit. The exactitude of the action becomes more important than what it represents, for it is not the ritual but the meaning that counts. How we conduct our worship is less important than knowing that our worth is in Christ.

For the Jews, the external particulars of religion were important. There were the dietary laws and the religious observances which were structured around the calendar and its commemoration of certain key events in their history, such as the Passover, the Tabernacle, the Levitical Offerings, the Sabbath rules or social practices. For them, at that stage in their history, until their new life should become internalized (*I will write my law in their hearts, etc*), following exact procedures in the prescribed way was vital: it was a discipline they were to adhere to until the day that they would have learned to behave in that way spontaneously. It was the shadow of a substance to come.

While for them, the practices were forerunners of a salvation to come, for us, Jesus is the means of bringing us to God. He is the One who is the substance. Fulfilment is in Jesus; He is the reality, the means of bringing us to God; He is the one who is the substance. He is the reality. It is not the ritual action or procedure of worshipping, but Him.

There is always a danger that we might depend on the procedures and the rituals rather than on the reality that is in Jesus Christ.

For example, over the years people have found that certain actions are helpful for them in expressing their worship. At the time they have meaning. However, with the passing of time they become formal actions and lose their significance. There are many typical examples of this. Bowing our heads when we take our pews in church, for example, is meant to be a prayerful waiting on God, but it can become a formal ritual without any real meaning - other than that it is the 'done thing', and people might criticise us if we don't! It can even be in dressing the church - or ourselves - for communion. Such rituals sometimes provide a false sense of value. Depending on them as an external action alone is a danger.

Ritual then is a distraction and can hinder Christian growth. It also lays

us open to criticism, as people will judge us as to whether we do, or do not do, certain things in certain ways.

Paul warns the Colossians against resting on such ritualism: we, too, need to beware.

2. Mysticism

Another danger facing the Colossian Christians was mysticism - a belief that the secret of spiritual life was to escape from the material and become engaged in the mystical, some kind of strange experience that could not be explained in material terms. It was a mystery beyond words - but gave the participant a wonderful feeling, a kind of emotional experience that made them feel good.

This led to practising the mysterious, often through secret procedures, and the sense of superior humility it falsely generated. In Colossae, some of the people, believing that there was a real distinction and separation between the material and the spiritual, claimed esoteric, mysterious experiences, such as worshipping angels whom they regarded as being intermediaries between humanity and God. It made them claim superiority. In so doing, as the initiated, they claimed special privilege and despised others who did not have such experiences.

There is a great interest in spirituality today. There are things like extra-sensory perception (being aware of things outside of ourselves) that can be described as out-of-body experiences which capture our attention. These things come under the general title of mysticism - an experience that cannot be explained simply in ordinary terms, but denotes contact with the unknowable.

It shows itself in many ways. It can be in esoteric and extraordinary activities; or it can be in the aesthetic practices much closer to hand. For example, coming to church can be for many people that kind of mystical experience, especially if the church building has aesthetic, mysterious qualities, a sense of being a sacred place. There is no doubt that people feel a sense of the awesomeness of God as they enter into a cathedral or an ornate building with many artefacts. Equally, the grandeur of nature and the solitude of the countryside can often be substituted for a spiritual experience.

This is something that for me is quite a strange thing whereby people will engage in some sort of 'spiritual' experience without really knowing what is happening, or what is behind it, or understanding it in relationship to God or scripture. There are many today who seek these mystical experiences or engage in mysticism.

In some charismatic churches there is a willingness to accept all manner of strange happenings or feelings, without knowing what is really happening. Within our own church there are those who look for some sort of spiritual experience but without having the relationship with Christ; people who want God's blessing without knowing what it means or entails whether it be for weddings, baptisms or even funerals. Somehow they seek to know that God is touching their lives (but not too much.)

Some of the particulars of mysticism can be seen in self denial (false humility); or, perhaps, the worship of angels (or the saints) as humility, as a kind of stepping stone to God, rather than direct worship of Him. Meditation can be purely experience-oriented. Many of the 'new' philosophies and the New Age movement are saying that you can find your place in the universe within yourself and that you need nothing outwith that: they say it is a journey of personal discovery.

Paul warned the Colossians about the danger of such practices. They were in danger of being misled; of becoming disconnected. There is here the notion of losing touch with the head i.e. Christ from whom the whole body - the church - grows.

These unusual practices carry a danger of special emphases that have the effect of differentiating them from normal traditional practices rooted in history. Such different practices tend to be regarded as special and out-of-the-ordinary. They tend to undermine the foundation of our faith.

A good test of any approach that claims to be special is: does it enhance - or despise - fundamental Christian practice? For example, Bible Study, prayer, praise and witnessing, although special practices, are all expressions of fundamental Christian belief and behaviour. They were there in the Book of Acts.

Paul's emphasis was that everything that is to be worshipped belongs to historical revelation, something that God has revealed to us even though we cannot see it in that form until now. The church was made up of people who had come to an experience of God through Jesus Christ.

To counteract segregation arising from a devotion to mysticism Paul emphasises the NT concept of the church as the body. We are to be part of 'the body', an integral part of the church, under the headship of Christ. There are other auxiliary structures as suggested by the ligaments and sinews, but all under Christ and all growing together as God causes the body to grow. No part - or practice - is to be a separate entity.

As people share in this experience, so they are the body. Real Christian

life is the extension of that spirituality, not an escape into something that is esoteric and cannot be described.

3. Legalism

Yet another of the distractions which in some ways is linked to ritual, but is different from it in degree, is legalism - blindly keeping the law. This is when we seek to keep God's rules - often under duress - in order to obtain acceptance by Him.

Legalism is imposing external, complying action in order to qualify. It is more than ritual which is a willing acceptance of exact procedures. It is rather an obligation to comply, normally in the form of imposed 'dos' and 'don'ts' where to comply means earned approval; to disregard means condemnation.

The regulations are generally determined by other people and relate to external actions such as bodily functions like eating or drinking, asceticism or abstention. Successful compliance leads to a false sense of virtue and merit which in turn generates false humility born of pride. It is easily handled because it is external and rarely affects life or attitude.

The issue is the old idea of law versus grace, of doing things that have to be done rather than doing things that are a genuine voluntary expression. Genuine spiritual life is all about surrender and allowing the power of God to be at work in our lives, to transform us, knowing that God loves us anyway. That is why He sent Jesus to save us. And that salvation is brought about by faith and not by what we do.

This was the crux of the Protestant Reformation when people began to see through the empty ritualism of the established church of the time.

With the passage of time the rituals associated with corporate worship can become important in themselves and more significant than the experience of which they are an expression. There is then a sense of obligation that there are certain things that have to be done in order to produce and to maintain life. There develops, then, a sense of legalism, - where it is actions which count, and only the right actions and outward adherence earn merit.

The Christian gospel is the opposite of that. The basis of salvation is by faith: it is by trusting in what God has already done for us and in having confidence in His saving grace and sanctifying power.

None of these three:

Ritualism - with its emphasis on procedures,

Mysticism - which stresses esoteric experiences that cannot be

adequately explained or related to truth, or

Legalism - the external adherence to the rules and regulations, is essential to Christian growth and all must be avoided. They can affect people's behaviour but they do not change them for the better. Nor do they give any place for the dynamic hope that the Colossians had which was: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"

We need to be aware of these dangers lest we be distracted and lose the way. We need to focus on higher things, to look to Christ and to follow His example.

We now go on to think of that in the next passage.