

The Spoiling of the Church (No 2) **Colossians 2:8-15**

As we have considered Paul's letter to the Church at Colossae we have seen his concern that the Church might not be seduced by false teaching.

In Col 2:4 we read Paul's words, "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments". The theme of imminent danger lurking to seduce the believers in Colossae is further emphasized in v.8 "Take heed lest there be any one that makes spoil of you through philosophy and vain deceit, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ." (RV and NIV)

The 'spoiling of the Church' is a present phenomena within the Church.

Satan does prowl around like a roaring lion seeking to devour the Church; to carry away those who claim to be believers into false teaching and hell!

What was the specific false teaching that threatened Colossae? Paul answers that question very plainly as he describes

2. The Substance of the Gospel

(Last week I spoke on Colossian 2:8-15 under the heading of 'The Spoiling of the Church' with the sub-heading of, 'The Scene in Scripture' ie., the scene of the spoiling of the Church as seen in Scripture. Now let me consider **how** 'The Spoiling of the Church' affects: 'The Substance of the Gospel'.)

Let me read Colossians 2:9-12,

9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. 11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature {the flesh}, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Paul is reminding the Church, he is quickly rehearsing, 'running past their minds', what they had come to believe in the gospel!

But in doing so he is also identifying the kind of teaching that was threatening their hold of the gospel ie., that they were required to return to Jewish ceremonial customs eg., circumcision; those who wanted to pedal their emphasis on Jewish legalism, were apparently on the Churches' doorstep!

We see something more of this emphasis in vs 16-17, "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. 17 These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality (the 'substance'), however, is found in Christ".

What is Paul saying in these verses, and the previous verses 9-12?

He is reminding them who Christ is: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form". Paul is saying that having received Christ they have 'fullness' ie, they are 'complete' in Christ; they need nothing more than the gospel!

'In Christ' the Church at Colossae has all it requires to secure eternal salvation; all that preceded the gospel by way of Jewish ceremonial requirements, whether 'animal' sacrifices or Jewish covenantal regulations and 'rights of passage' (such as circumcision) - were merely 'shadows' pointing to the 'substance' of the gospel.

Murray Harris says with crystal clarity,

"Food regulations and calendar observances, and all such legal prescriptions that belonged to a transitory old Age, were merely pale adumbrations (or pale resemblances) of a coming permanent reality now realized in the person and gospel of Christ. The implication is that the shadows not only are now superfluous but actually disappear with the appearance of the "substance".

In other words, the old rites under Judaism were 'shadows'; significant shadows, yet shadows destined to be superseded. What cast those shadows was Christ; He was the 'substance', the 'reality' that stood behind the shadows. Having received Christ in the Gospel, they had come to the 'fullness' of such shadows! 'Faith in Christ' supplied the 'fullness' of what, in the past, were shadows of what was to come! Let me illustrate what I am saying. What was 'circumcision' under the Old Covenant? It was a 'sign' of covenantal membership; of belonging to God's people and of keeping strict obedience to every aspect of God's Law!

But all this was now a thing of the past! The gospel of Christ had totally eclipsed and transcended Judaism! Under the gospel the 'sign' of circumcision had been replaced with 'baptism'; which was now, not only inclusive of female children, but had severed circumcision (excuse the pun) from the gospel message forever! Faith in Christ had now rendered 'circumcision', and other OT ceremonial rites, redundant or of no further use! The principle of 'faith in Christ' or 'faith in the gospel' had superseded the previous O T ceremonial rites; such rites were now obsolete through the Gospel! That is why Paul can say in v.11-12, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, {or the flesh} not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him" (raised with Him to 'new life' in holy living)

Paul is describing in this passage, what circumcision was really all about; what it was really meant to convey! It was about the removal of a small portion of flesh, symbolizing the removal of the sinful nature and the commencement of a new life of obedience to Christ. Because those at Colossae had placed their faith in Christ, and had been raised to a new life of obedience to Christ, they had received the 'substance' of which physical circumcision was only a 'shadow'; they had received 'the circumcision done by Christ', not requiring human hands to perform! They no longer had any need of 'physical' circumcision; the 'circumcision done by Christ', in raising them to a new life of obedience to God through Christ, 'superseded' the O T regulation.

In these verses (11-12) Paul convincingly shows that 'physical circumcision' is 'ended'; it must not be pursued and allowed to carry believers away from the gospel and into false teaching. But is this issue our present concern? No!

The 'particular' errors of Paul's day, and the religious pressures of its culture, have little to do with us! Our dangers are more subtle, but equally dangerous. The error faced by the Church in Colossae lay in the **addition** of Jewish ceremonial obligations by attaching them to the gospel. While the 'addition' of beliefs still threatens the Church today under the pressures of 'pluralism' eg., to accept all religious teaching as equally valid alongside Christianity as a way of salvation, there is, I believe, a more subtle and sinister threat facing Church of the 21st Century; **and that threat is, not the error of 'addition' but of abbreviation!**

The Church in the first Century was being seduced to return to 'shadows'!

What are the 'shadows' for the Church today? It is to substitute for the 'substance' (ie., the fullness of Christ/gospel) - 'shallow' teaching; it is to substitute 'short-cuts'; smorgasbord Christianity (taking the bits you prefer ie., 'short cut' Christianity); it is to so abbreviate the gospel that you erode the 'substance' (the fullness) that is in Christ and the gospel. Let me refer to this 'shallow' and 'short-cut' Christianity under the general heading of,

Reductionism

Reductionism means, "the tendency to make supposedly comprehensive explanations of complex phenomena simply by analyzing and describing their parts." (*Macquarie Dictionary*)

Reductionist thinking seeks to 'reduce' Christian theology (which is complex) to the simplest possible terms, but in doing so, damages the integrity of the Christian gospel; it undermines it, and converts it to a false gospel!

In the extreme, reductionist thinking in the Church has led to a new 'inclusivism' ie., the idea in the Church that it does not matter what you believe; doctrine does not matter so lets incorporate every kind of aberrant/incorrect view of God and morality into the Christian system!

Reductionism has led to a new theological effeminacy that cannot stomach the strength of Apostolic theology. It denigrates Apostolic teaching by despising Christianity's claim to be 'unique'; and we all know, or are told, that we cannot possibly tolerate 'uniqueness' in a pluralist society! Such thinking dumbs down doctrine, and wants to extract from the Scriptures any doctrine or teaching that causes offence to the modern world! Os Guinness says that the Church has replaced 'Sola Scriptura' with 'Sola Cultura' ie., what the culture wants is the is the new rule of 'authority' in the Church. Consequently, Judgement and hell and the full form of the Ten Commandments are never mentioned! God is reduced to simply a 'loving' Being who allows us to indulge our selfishness.

Another aspect of reductionism in the Church occurs where individuals in the Church seek to reduce 'complex theology' into simplistic formulas. We see it illustrated in evangelistic material which often fails to explain what the Gospel saves us from. Again, such reductionist thinking uses very significant theological principles like 'grace alone' and 'faith alone', but fails to carefully explain such Reformation principles and the 'balance' that must be retained in such principles, with the growing tendency towards a disregard for biblical obedience.

The Church increasingly adopts an 'antinomian' stance (ie., it is 'anti or 'not too particular about the strict keeping God's law). It considers an over strictness in obedience to God's law as a form of 'legalism' – that in their opinion has been abolished by 'grace'! (I will elaborate and clarify such comments next week when we look at the final words of Paul in Col 2:8-15)

We see such 'reductionism' even in the word 'gospel' itself; ie., we 'simplify', we 'reduce', we 'abbreviate' such terms thinking we make the gospel easier to understand but only succeed in muddying the waters ! If you ask most people what 'gospel' means they will reply, it means 'good news'! But the word 'gospel' does not mean 'good news'! The word 'gospel' in the NT means an authoritative message; a message that must be obeyed or face the consequences of disobedience! Whether it is 'good news' depends entirely upon your response to that message; eg., for those who reject its message it pronounces the most terrifying of judgements! There is great and grave danger in any acceptance of 'reductionist' thinking by the Church; so abbreviating and simplifying the gospel that you reduce its claims and costliness to suit your own convenience! **We make Christianity 'fit' our worldly lifestyle, rather than Christianity shape us towards its godly lifestyle!**

Further, this grave danger reduces the gospel to slick and simple formulas expressed, as we saw last week, in the words of Dean Henry Alford when he said, "once converted to God, once the religious profession put on, once come out of the world, all was well" ie., you have the 'ticket' to heaven! N T Christianity (and the Christianity expressed in our 1662 P/B/Liturgy) is 'threefold' ; it begins with 'conversion', then 'continues' in a life of holy obedience, and finally is 'crowned'. (I will elaborate on this in the next sermon)

Current Christianity largely omits the second stage – the thought is , 'I have the 'ticket' via 'grace' so I don't have to be too concerned about my obedience! Therein lies the danger: **there can be no 'crowning' without 'continuing in obedience'!** We see the emphasis on 'continuing' in obedience wonderfully expressed in the Collects following the Service of Holy Communion (BCP) where it says, "Assist us mercifully, O Lord ... and dispose the way of your servants towards the attainment of everlasting life direct, sanctify and govern, both our hearts and bodies, in the way of your laws and in the works of your commandments."

The Gospel defies reductionist principles; no abbreviations!

Let me quote again the words of Henry Alford, the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral who said,

"remember, that all through the Christian's life, the outward influence of the world, the inward temptations of the flesh, the spiritual attacks of the Devil, are ever working to extinguish the light which is kindled within us; that to maintain that light is a struggle against nature, against habit, against inclination.... wise indeed is that Christian.. to whom all means and opportunities of grace are precious; who does not say within himself, "Once the Lord's always the Lord's", but prays and strives and presses onwards .. that he may at any moment rise and trim his lamp, and go forth with joy to meet his Lord".

As I conclude let me ask you to ponder the words of Os Guinness in a recent book published in 2003, with the Title 'Prophetic Untimeliness'.

"Evangelicals were once known as 'the serious people'. It is sad to note that today many evangelicals are the most superficial of religious believers – lightweight in thinking, gossamer-thin in theology, and avid proponents of spirituality-lite in terms of preaching and responses to life." p.77

We will consider the relevance of those words as we conclude in the final of this brief series next week, reflecting further on the effects of 'reductionism' with respect to Col 2:13-15 under the heading of 'The Soiling of the Church' / 'The Sentence Cancelled'.

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