

Colossians 2 on the Traditions of Men and Religious Holidays

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians*, trans. Rev. John Pringle (The Calvin Translation Society, 1843), 181-204, emphasis added, English updated.¹

Colossians 2:8-9

“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. 9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;” (NKJ)

Colossian 2:16-23

“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. 18 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, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase *that is* from God. 20 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 -- 21 “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” 22 which all concern things which perish with the using -- according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 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.” (NKJ)

In this study, we will see that God has banished the traditions of men from His church. Christ commands His people to obey Scripture alone, to obey all that He commanded (Matthew 28:20).

Colossians 2:8, “*According to the tradition of men*”. The apostle Paul points out more precisely what kind of *philosophy* he reproves, and at the same time convicts it of vanity for two reasons—first, because it is *not according to Christ*, but according to the inclinations of men; and, second, because it consists in the *elements of the world*. Observe, however, that Paul places Christ in opposition to the *elements of the world*, equally as to the *tradition of men*, by which he means that **whatever is hatched in man’s brain is not in accordance with Christ, who has been appointed us by the Father as our sole Teacher, that He might retain us in the simplicity of His gospel.** [Christ’s gospel] is corrupted by even a small portion of the leaven of *human traditions*. He means also, that all doctrines are foreign to Christ that make the worship of God, which we know to be spiritual, according to Christ’s rule, to consist in the *elements of the world*, and also such as fetter [bind] the minds of men by such trifles and frivolities, while Christ calls us directly to Himself.

Application: Christmas, Easter, Advent, and Lent (as religious holidays and seasons) are the inventions of men and thus not in accordance with Christ. Christ did not teach us to observe these religious holidays and seasons, and therefore to do so is not in harmony with the simplicity of His gospel.

¹ Titles and modern application have been added by the editors of Wabash Bible Ministries.

But what is meant by the phrase — *elements of the world*? There can be no doubt that it means ceremonies. For he immediately afterwards adduces one instance by way of example—*circumcision*. The reason why the apostle Paul calls them by such a name is usually explained in two ways. Some think that it is a metaphor, so that the *elements* are the rudiments of children, which do not lead forward to mature doctrine. Others take it in its proper signification, as denoting things that are outward and are liable to corruption, which avail nothing for the kingdom of God. The former exposition I rather approve of, as also in Galatians 4:3.

9. For in Him dwells. Here we have the reason why those *elements of the world*, which are taught by men, do not accord with Christ—because they are additions for supplying a deficiency, as they speak. Now **in Christ there is a perfection, to which nothing can be added.** Hence everything that mankind of themselves mix up, is at variance with Christ's nature, because it charges Him with imperfection. This argument of itself will suffice for setting aside all the contrivances of Papists. For to what purpose do they tend, but to perfect what was commenced by Christ? Now this outrage upon Christ is not by any means to be endured. They allege, it is true, that they add nothing to Christ, inasmuch as the things that they have appended to the gospel are, as it were, a part of Christianity, but they do not effect [bring about] an escape by a cavil of this kind. For Paul does not speak of an imaginary Christ, but of a Christ preached, who has revealed Himself by express doctrine.

Further, when he says that the *fullness of the Godhead* dwells in Christ, he means simply, that God is wholly found in Him, so that he who is not contented with Christ alone, desires something better and more excellent than God. The sum is this, that God has manifested Himself to us fully and perfectly in Christ.

Application: Why do religious traditions (like Christmas, Easter, Advent, and Lent) not accord with Christ? It is because in Christ there is a perfection. Traditions say that Christ is deficient, not sufficient. Just because these religious holidays are “a part of Christianity” does not mean that God approves of them.

Colossians 2:16 “Let no one therefore judge you.” What he had previously said of circumcision he now extends to **the difference of meats and days**. For circumcision was the first introduction to the observance of the law; other things followed afterwards. **To judge means** here, to hold one to be guilty of a crime, or **to impose a scruple of conscience, so that we are no longer free.** He says, therefore, that it is not in the power of men to make us subject to the observance of rites which Christ has by His death abolished, and exempts us from their yoke, that we may not allow ourselves to be fettered by the laws which they have imposed. He tacitly, however, places Christ in contrast with all mankind, lest any one should extol himself so daringly as to attempt to take away what He has given him.

Application: The Colossians were not to let anyone judge them or bind their conscience to the observance of Jewish dietary laws or religious holidays. Christ, by His death, abolished these old covenant ceremonial laws and exempts us from their yoke. How much more ought Christians to resist manmade traditions and commands to observe religious holidays and seasons that have been invented by men but are no where mentioned in the word of God? No church has the right to tell Christians to observe Christmas, Easter, Advent, Lent, or any other religious holiday or season that God has not commanded us to observe.

“In respect of a festival-day.” . . . [Those who] make a distinction of days, separate, as it were, one from another. Such a mode of partition was suitable for the Jews, that they might

celebrate religiously the days that were appointed, by separating them from others. Among Christians, however, such a division has ceased.

But some one will say, “We still keep up some observance of days.” I answer, that **we do not by any means observe days, as though there were any sacredness in holidays, or as though it were not lawful to labor upon them, but that respect is paid to government and order—not to days.** . . .

Application: Those who set apart religious holidays and seasons are causing division in the Church. Christians are to be of one mind, for we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). Paul wrote the Corinthians, “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). How can Christians be of the same mind if some celebrate human traditions and others hold only to what Scripture commands? John Calvin maintained that just because we accept the order of the calendar of days (Sunday-Saturday) and abstain from work on certain holidays set apart by our government, that does not mean that we “observe days” as holy or religious. Yes, it would be lawful to work on holidays; there is no sacredness or holiness in holidays. We just pay our respect to the government if we take the day off work. It is okay to take days off from our ordinary employments to rest, spend time with family and friends, or do other work. It is wrong to set aside days as sacred or religious, when God has not commanded us to do so.

Colossians 2:17. “Which are a shadow of things to come.” The reason why he frees Christians from the observance of the Jewish holidays is, that they were *shadows* at a time when Christ was still, in a manner, absent. For he contrasts shadows with revelation, and absence with manifestation. Those, therefore, who still adhere to those *shadows*, act like one who should judge of a man’s appearance from his shadow, while in the mean time he had himself personally before his eyes. [Similar is the scandal of those who remember baby Jesus in the manger each December but fail to exalt the resurrected Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, featured in Revelation, who is and forever more shall be.] For Christ is now manifested to us, and hence we enjoy Him as being present. *The body, says he, is of Christ, that is, in Christ.* For the substance of those things which the ceremonies anciently prefigured is now presented before our eyes in Christ, inasmuch as He contains in Himself everything that they marked out as future.

Hence, the man that calls back the ceremonies [including old covenant religious holidays] into use, either buries the manifestation of Christ, or robs Christ of His excellence, and makes Him in a manner void. Accordingly, should any one of mortals assume to himself in this matter the office of judge, let us not submit to him, inasmuch as Christ, the only competent Judge, sets us free.

For when he says, *Let no man judge you*, he does not address the false apostles, but **prohibits the Colossians from yielding their neck to unreasonable requirements.** To abstain, it is true, from swine’s flesh [i.e., pork], is in itself harmless, but the binding to do it is pernicious, because it makes void the grace of Christ. . . .

18. “Let no one take from you the palm.” Paul alludes to runners, or wrestlers, to whom the *palm* was assigned, on condition of their not giving way in the middle of the course, or after the contest had been commenced. He admonishes them, therefore, that the false apostles aimed at nothing else than to snatch away from them the palm, inasmuch as they draw them

aside from the rectitude of their course. Hence it follows that they must be shunned as the most injurious pests. The passage is also carefully to be marked as meaning, that **all those who draw us aside from the simplicity of Christ cheat us out of the prize of our high calling** (Philippians 3:14). . . .

“Puffed up in vain by a fleshly mind.” Paul employs the expression *fleshly mind* to denote the perspicuity of the human intellect, however great it may be. For he places it in contrast with that spiritual wisdom which is revealed to us from heaven in accordance with that statement—Flesh and blood has not revealed it to you (Matthew 16:17).

Whoever, therefore, depends upon his own reason, inasmuch as the acuteness of the flesh is wholly at work in him, Paul declares him to be *puffed up in vain*. And **truly all the wisdom that men have from themselves is mere wind; hence there is nothing solid except in the word of God and the illumination of the Spirit**. And observe, that those are said to be *puffed up* who insinuate themselves under a show of humility. For it happens, as Augustine elegantly writes to Paulinus, by wonderful means, as to the soul of man, that it is more puffed up from a false humility than if it were openly proud.

19. Not holding the head. He condemns in the use of one word whatever does not bear a relation to Christ. He also confirms his statement on the ground that all things flow from Him, and depend on Him. Hence, should any one call us anywhere else than to Christ, though in other respects he were big with heaven and earth, he is empty and full of wind. Let us, therefore, without concern, bid him farewell. Observe, however, of whom Paul is speaking, namely, of those who did not openly reject or deny Christ, but, not accurately understanding His office and power, by seeking out other helps and means of salvation (as they commonly speak) were not firmly rooted in Him.

From whom the whole body by joints. He simply means this, that the Church does not stand otherwise than in the event of all things being furnished to her by Christ, the *Head*, and, accordingly, that her entire safety consists in Him. The body, it is true, has its nerves, its *joints, and ligaments*, but all these things derive their vigor solely from the Head, so that the whole binding of them together is from that source. What, then, must be done? The constitution of the body will be in a right state, if simply the Head, which furnishes the several members with everything that they have, is allowed, without any hindrance, to have the preeminence. This Paul speaks of as the *increase of God*, by which he means that it is not every increase that is approved by God, but only that which has a relation to the Head. For we see that the kingdom of the Pope is not merely tall and large, but swells out into a monstrous size. As, however, we do not there see what Paul here requires in the Church, what shall we say, but that it is a humpbacked body, and a confused mass that will fall to pieces of itself.

Colossians 2:20 “If you are dead.” He had previously said, that the ordinances were fastened to the cross of Christ (Colossians 2:14). He now employs another figure of speech—that we are *dead* to them, as he teaches us elsewhere, that we are *dead to the law*, and the law, on the other hand, to us (Galatians 2:19). The term death means abrogation, but it is more expressive *and more emphatic*. He says, therefore, that the Colossians, have nothing to do with ordinances. Why? **Because they have died with Christ to ordinances; that is, after they died with Christ by regeneration (being born again), they were, through His kindness, set free from ordinances, that they may not belong to them any more.** Hence Paul concludes that they are by no means bound by the ordinances, which the false apostles endeavored to impose on them.

Application: If Christians are free from observing the old covenant law with its ordinances, how much more are we free from observing the traditions and commandments of men. “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1)!

Beware of the tyranny of legalism!

21. “Eat not, taste not.” . . . **Paul points out, by way of imitation, to what length the waywardness of those who bind consciences by their laws is accustomed to proceed.** From the very beginning they are unduly rigorous: hence he sets out with their prohibition—not simply against eating, but even against slightly partaking. After they have obtained what they wish they go beyond that command, so that they afterwards declare it to be unlawful to taste of what they do not wish should be eaten. At last they make it criminal even to *touch*.

In short, when persons have once taken upon them to tyrannize over men’s souls, there is no end of new laws being daily added to old ones, and new enactments starting up from time to time. How bright a mirror there is as to this in Popery! Hence Paul acts admirably well in admonishing us that **human traditions are a labyrinth, in which consciences are more and more entangled; nay more, are snares, which from the beginning bind in such a way that in course of time they strangle in the end.**

Application: Some churches observe Christmas but not Advent. Many others observe Christmas and Easter but not Lent. Yet others set nearly every day of the year aside as sacred, in honor of some event from the life of Christ, in honor of some saint from church history, etc. The evil of human traditions and adding to God’s word can be seen in the fact that once persons take it upon themselves to bind men’s consciences to their manmade religious traditions, there is no end to the new laws and enactments that will evolve as the church “progresses” away from what Scripture enjoins on believers. The Protestant Reformers called the church from darkness to light, out of the Dark Ages of Medieval Catholicism into the light of the pure word of God. The Protestant Reformation called the church back to Christian liberty, to the word of God alone, as the only rule that binds men’s consciences. Today, consciences are once again bound to religious holidays and ceremonies invented by men instead of to the simplicity of Christ and His pure worship. Manmade religion is a maze, a labyrinth, and, in the end, it suffocates men and women by its oppression and tyranny.

God condemns all manmade religious laws and tradition and banishes them from His Church!

22. “All which things tend to corruption.” He sets aside, by a twofold argument, the enactments of which he has made mention—**first**, because they make religion consist in things outward and frail, which have no connection with the spiritual kingdom of God; and **second**, because they are from men, not from God.

He combats the first argument, also, in Romans 14:17, when he says, The kingdom of God is not in meat and drink; likewise in 1 Corinthians 6:13, Meat for the belly, and the belly for meats; God will destroy both. Christ also Himself says, Whatever enters into the mouth defiles not the man, because it goes down into the belly, and is cast forth (Matthew 15:11).

The sum is this—that the worship of God, true piety, and the holiness of Christians, do not consist in drink, and food, and clothing, which are things that are transient and liable to corruption, and perish by abuse. For abuse is properly applicable to those things which are corrupted by the use of them. Hence enactments are of no value in reference to those things which tend to excite scruples of conscience. But in Popery you would scarcely find any other holiness, than what consists in little observances of corruptible things.

A *second* refutation is added—that they originated with men, and have not God as their Author; and **by this thunderbolt he prostrates and swallows up all traditions of men**. For why? This is Paul's reasoning: **“Those who bring consciences into bondage do injury to Christ, and make void His death. For whatever is of human invention does not bind conscience.”**

Application: Any manmade traditions have their origin in the inventions of men's brains, not in God's word. God condemns and banishes all the doctrines and traditions of men from His church (cf. Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7-9). Ironically, those who bring consciences into bondage by encouraging Christians to observe human traditions, regardless of their intentions, do injury to Christ and make void His death. The Christian's conscience is to be bound to the word of God alone. Human inventions, church traditions, self-invented worship, church holidays, should not bind a Christian's conscience. It is extremely sinful to impose the traditions of men on Christ's Church.

23. “Which have indeed a show of wisdom.” Here we have the anticipation of an objection, in which, while Paul concedes to his adversaries what they allege, he at the same time reckons it wholly worthless. For it is as though he had said, that he does not regard their having a *show of wisdom*. But *show* is placed in contrast with *reality*, for it is an *appearance*, as they commonly speak, which deceives by resemblance.

Observe, however, of what colors this *show* consists, according to Paul. He makes mention of three—**self-invented worship, [false] humility, and neglect of the body.**

The Greek word translated as *self-invented worship* means “superstition.” However, Paul has an eye to the etymology of the term, for the word literally denotes a voluntary service, which men choose for themselves at their own option, without authority from God. Self-invented worship is “worship contrived at pleasure, that is to say, invented by men.” Human traditions, therefore, are agreeable to us on this account, that they are in accordance with our understanding, for any one will find in his own brain the first outlines of them. This is the *first* pretext.

The *second* is [false] humility, inasmuch as obedience both to God and men is pretended, so that men do not refuse even unreasonable burdens. And for the most part traditions of this kind are of such a nature as to appear to be admirable exercises of humility.

They allure, also, by means of a *third* pretext, inasmuch as they seem to be of the greatest avail for the mortification of the flesh, while there is no sparing of the body. Paul, however, bids farewell to those disguises, for **what is in high esteem among men is often an abomination in the sight of God** (Luke 16:15). Farther, *that* is a treacherous obedience, and a perverse and sacrilegious humility, which transfers to men the authority of God; and *neglect of the body* is not of so great importance, as to be worthy to be set forth to admiration as the service of God.

Some one, however, will feel astonished, that Paul does not take more pains in pulling off those masks. I answer, that he on good grounds rests contented with the simple term *show*. For the principles which he had taken as opposed to this are incontrovertible—that the body is in Christ, and that, consequently, those do nothing but impose upon miserable men, who set before them shadows. *Secondly*, the spiritual kingdom of Christ is by no means taken up with frail and corruptible elements. *Thirdly*, by the death of Christ such observances were put an end to, that we might have no connection with them; and, *fourthly*, **God is our only Lawgiver** (Isaiah 33:22). Whatever may be brought forward on the other side, let it have ever so much splendor, is fleeting *show*.

God defines what is acceptable worship.

Secondly, he reckoned it enough to admonish the Colossians, not to be deceived by the putting forth of empty things. There was no necessity for dwelling at greater length in reproving them. **For it should be a settled point among all the pious, that the worship of God ought not to be measured according to our views; and that, consequently, any kind of service is not lawful, simply on the ground that it is agreeable to us.**

True humility is yielding obedience simply to God's commands.

This, also, ought to be a commonly received point—that **we owe to God such humility as to yield obedience simply to His commands, so as not to lean to our own understanding**, etc. (Proverbs 3:5)—and that the limit of humility towards men is this—that each one submit himself to others in love.

Now, when they contend that the wantonness of the flesh is repressed by abstinence from meats, the answer is easy—that we must not therefore abstain from any particular food as being unclean, but must eat sparingly of what we do eat of, both in order that we may soberly and temperately make use of the gifts of God, and that we may not, impeded by too much food and drink, forget those things that are God's. Hence it was enough to say that these were masks, that the Colossians, being warned, might be on their guard against false pretexts.

Thus, at the present day, Papists are not lacking in specious pretexts, by which to set forth their own laws, however they may be—some of them impious and tyrannical, and others of them silly and trifling. When, however, we have granted them everything, there remains, nevertheless, this refutation by Paul, which is of itself more than sufficient for dispelling all the mists by which they endeavor to blind the eyes of the poor world; not to say how far removed their traditions are from so honorable an appearance as that which Paul describes.

The principal holiness of the Papacy, at the present day, consists in monkhood, and of what nature that is, I am ashamed and grieved to make mention, lest I should stir up so abominable an odor. Farther, it is of importance to consider here, how prone, nay, how forward the mind of man is to artificial forms of worship. For the Apostle here graphically describes the state of the old system of monkhood, which came into use a hundred years after his death, as though he had never spoken a word. The zeal of men, therefore, for superstition is surpassingly mad, which could not be restrained by so plain a declaration of God from breaking forth, as historical records testify.