

Colossians 2:16

“Therefore do not let anyone judge you.”

If you have ever been on an aircraft journey you will be familiar with airline catering

- On a transatlantic flight, we had eagerly awaited our meals, which included a small packets of peanuts
- Probably only a long-haul flight does one spend time reading the peanut packet
- Which carried description: ‘peanuts’; instructions: ‘open packet, eat nuts’; and a warning: ‘contains nuts’
- It is hard to contemplate that a literate person, capable of reading the instructions
- Should not know that the aim of the game with a packet of peanuts is to open the packet and eat the nuts
- just in case there were instructions; but the warning on a packet of peanuts ‘contains nuts’ seems superfluous
- That said, on many occasions, the warning can be every bit as important as the instructions

There is a sense in which the first two chapters of Colossians follow this pattern

- The Christian is described: once alienated now reconciled (1:21)
- Instructions are given: continue in faith (1:23); but these are followed by a series of warnings

See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy (2:8)

- The background seems to be that some visitors have arrived
- they are teaching that they have a fuller knowledge of God than the Colossians
- and they claim their credentials are based on primitive tradition and spiritual authority
- it is a possibility that these visitors are playing down the divinity of Christ
- and instead talking about angels and spiritual powers
- The hollow and deceptive philosophy of which Paul speaks is not Greek philosophy but spiritual superiority

The visitors to Colossae seem to have been claiming special power/authority

- but if this caused them to be playing down the divinity of Christ, the Apostle Paul was having none of it

For in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fulness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

(Colossians 2:9-10)

Paul reminds the believers:

- You have been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through faith (2:12)
- You have been made alive with Christ (2:13)
- All this I expressed as fulness, fellowship and freedom through Christ

But after this first warning, Paul continues with three further warnings

- Do not let anyone judge you (v. 16)
- Do not let anyone ... disqualify you (v. 18)
- Do not let anyone ... enslave you (a paraphrase v.20)

Warnings are part of daily life

- it is easy to allow familiarity to cause us to neglect them, that is often when tragic accidents happen
- the spiritual life also has both its dangers and its warnings
- Paul was not afraid of controversial issues, most of his letters were written because of controversy
- Sometimes, to hide from controversy implies that important things do not matter
- Even the warning on the packet of peanuts, though obvious, is important
- And in the New Testament even the most obvious warnings matter; the first such warning is:

I DO NOT LET ANYONE JUDGE YOU (V. 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.

This is the danger of legalism

- most of us who have been in the Christian community for a time are familiar with this
- we have seen before the danger of teaching that salvation depended on ‘Jesus and’
- the implication of the text is that someone was judging them
- the false teachers at Colossae had rigid restrictions about eating, drinking and observing the religious calendar
- there is a possibility that some people were insisting on the observance of Judaism
- in that case ‘what you eat or drink’ refers to the Old Testament laws about food
- otherwise it is just a particular set of rules and regulations that were being imposed
- religious festival, new moon celebration, Sabbath day probably refer to various days of the Jewish calendar
- such annual, monthly and weekly festivals were a shadow of the things that were to come
- Old Testament observances anticipated that Christ would come, so the reality is found in Christ
- So, Paul’s thought is that the believer is now freed from obligations of this kind
- For the Christian, every day is holy. In short, it is not ‘Jesus and legalistic living’ with rules and regulations

On the other hand, it is a matter of balance

- in previous generations, where children’s swings were locked on Sundays, legalism abounded
- girls were taught that it was wrong to sew or knit on a Sunday and boys that it was wrong to play ball games
- while the adults had no radio on Sunday, or television or pop music (inc. Good Friday and Christmas Day)

As a little boy, I was taught that going to the seaside on Sunday was wrong

- as an adult, I tried going to the seaside once or twice on a Sunday
- discovered I didn't like it and didn't go to evening service in a good frame of mind

Forty years ago Harold Moulton remarked:

In past generations this verse might ... have been gently shown to Sabbatarians. Now they are harder to find. It is not that we have learnt its lesson, but that we care less about worship.

And there, it seems to me, is more or less the solution; religious practice easily takes the place of spiritual things

- one thing about a legalistic routines is that they are very good for the ego
- the danger is that these routines become an end in themselves
- legalism, living by rules and regulations, at its worst is salvation by good works
- Jesus 'and legalistic religious practices', but the work of Jesus on the cross does not need supplementing
- Legalism (life by rules and regulations) and lawlessness (life with no restraints) are equally attractive
- What God has declared wrong is still wrong. It is the call to Christ-like living that we need to hear afresh
- Paul's Christian liberty is exactly the opposite of doing just what you like
- Instead of submitting to man-made rules, believers must submit to Christ
- Who is not only their Redeemer but also their Master

The gospel depends not on law but on grace

- legalism (life by rules and regulations) is a popular substitute for grace
- that is should be so, is mind-boggling to Paul as it should be to us

II DO NOT LET ANYONE ... DISQUALIFY YOU (v. 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.

The is the danger of mysticism

- it seems that one of the false-teachers at Colossae was teaching angel-worship
- and it seems that this false-teaching is supported by a vision
- such a spiritual leader sounds very impressive but is leading the people astray
- the warning given in Jeremiah is plain enough:

“I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, ‘I had a dream! I had a dream!’ How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds?”

(Jeremiah 23:25-26)

If the false-teachers at Colossae claimed inside knowledge, really they were full of nothing more than hot air

- they had lost connection with the Head from whom the whole body ... grows as God causes it to grow
- the danger of such teachers is plain enough - it is easy to be mesmerised by teaching
- that is peppered with phrases such as, ‘God said to me’ or ‘God showed to me’
- the Christian who uses such phrases needs to be mighty sure that it is God
- while believers listening has to be on their guard so as not to be taken in

It could well be that the false-teachers were claiming special humility being willing to worship angels

- others might have suggested that what was needed was some initiation into hidden or secret knowledge
- but we can approach Jesus directly; no Christian needs an initiation ceremony to be in the presence of God
- It is not Jesus and some kind of mystic experience

On the other hand, it is a matter of balance

- when Isaiah saw the Lord he confessed how sinful he was (Isaiah 6:5)
- when Peter saw Jesus walk on the water, he fell down aware of his sin (Luke 5:8)
- When John saw the risen Christ he fell at his feet as though dead (Rev 1:17)
- Worship, prayer and the Word of God are the divinely appointed means for growth
- There is no place for cheap familiarity in worship

Religious mysticism attracts people

- no doubt this is behind some of the interest in Eastern religions and new ageism
- but there is also a danger in a kind of Christian mysticism
- at both the sacramental and Free Church end of the spectrum of churchmanship
- there are those people who claim their immediate relation with the ultimate
- through prayer, contemplation and ascetic acts – who then neglect the Bible
- John Wesley told his brother that mystical teachings were
- ‘the rock on which I had the nearest made a shipwreck of the faith’
- a faith that would through the rest of his life be firmly rooted in the Word of God

It is little wonder after the warning about the dangers of mysticism

- Paul should proceed to his third warning:

III DO NOT LET ANYONE ENSLAVE YOU (v. 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?

The danger of asceticism

- like the legalist, the ascetic's entire life is wrapped in a system of rules
- these man-made rules are supposed to be a means of gaining favour with God
- the ascetic hopes to sanctify the soul by the discipline of the body, through buffeting and punishment

Paul's approach is completely different: the rules and requirements of asceticism are of no use to the believer

- at conversion, the believer leaves the basic principles of this world behind and is liberated from their authority
- the rules that Paul had in mind are plain enough - 'Do not handle!' 'Do not taste!' 'Do not touch!'
- Again, the false teachers had implied that abstinence was necessary for salvation

I am on fairly safe ground as non-smoking, teetotaller, in mentioning that, if not today then in a previous generation

- someone's spiritual standing was seriously questioned if they smoked or drank alcohol
- we were then subjected to the nonsense that the wine Jesus drank was alcohol-free
- and had the crazy spectacle of seriously overweight people
- breaking off between cream buns to lecture smokers on the health-risks of smoking
- this is all a strange modern form of asceticism
- if someone, like me, thinks that life is better without alcohol or tobacco – fine
- but let's not pretend that it makes me more or less spiritual than anyone else

Pursued to its logical conclusion, if holiness consists in avoiding contamination

- Only total withdrawal from the world will do
- You join a monastery (physical withdrawal from the world)
- Or a sect, such as the Old Order Amish in Pennsylvania and other parts of the USA
- Or if there is not enough room for that in a more densely populated country like England
- You join the Exclusive Wing of the Plymouth Brethren (in a sociological withdrawal)
- But this idea of avoiding contamination can also exist among some apparently 'ordinary' Christians
- Who have become so 'other-worldly' that they cannot begin to interact with others
- There are some Christians who proudly boast that they do not have any friends outside of their church
- possibly for fear of worldly compromise, giving up their non-believing friends in the cause of asceticism
- The ground of salvation became Jesus and 'abstinence'

On the other hand, it is a matter of balance

- to be a follower of Jesus does not mean to live under rules and regulations
- but to have a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ
- the believer is free from trying to be made right with God by religious practices
- the believer is made right with God by God's grace made known in Jesus
- in effect, it means spiritual renewal from the inside out and not from the outside in
- and all of this is by the power of the indwelling Christ
- in actual fact, self-discipline in the New Testament is considered a good thing
- the body is not, of itself, evil, as some ascetics taught
- it needs to be brought under the control of the right master

Paul reminds the believers:

- You have been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through faith (2:12)
- You have been made alive with Christ (2:13)
- Believers have fulness, fellowship and freedom through Christ

This freedom is expressed in different ways

- Do not let anyone judge you (v. 16)
- The danger of legalism
- The Christian life is not about rules and regulations
- Neither is it about lawlessness

Do not let anyone ... disqualify you (v. 18)

- The danger of mysticism
- The Christian life is not about hidden knowledge and experiences
- Neither it is about cheap familiarity in worship

Do not let anyone ... enslave you (a paraphrase v. 20)

- The danger of asceticism
- The Christian life is not about religious practices
- Neither is it about casual indiscipline – but about a living relationship with Jesus

Therefore do not let anyone judge you ... disqualify you ... enslave you.