

THE DANGER OF DECEPTION

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IN THIS SERIES OF THREE BIBLE STUDIES, MET EXEC MEMBER, THE REVD KEVIN JONES, VISITS THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST AS REVEALED IN THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS (THE SUBJECT OF THE 2019 BIBLE MONTH).

The Church perpetually faces the problem of understanding and interpreting Christ's teaching. The Colossians faced two options, following 'fine sounding arguments' (2:4), based on 'hollow and deceptive philosophy' and 'human traditions' (2:8); or 'understanding' 'the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:2-3).

The warning is, if their roots do not go deep into Christ, the plant will die: 'just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him' (2:6-7). If our roots are not deep in God's word, we will easily fall to 'deceptive philosophy.' So, how are they and we to keep ourselves from deception? The answer is we keep our eyes open. First, we look back at what Christ has done. Christianity never starts with us; it starts with God, and the first thing he does is cleanse the believer.

LOOK BACK – GOD GIVES US A NEW BIRTH

'In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ' (2:11-12). God cuts off our sinful nature. Circumcision, was the sign of the old covenant. Jews were separated and holy because they were circumcised. Paul is clear that circumcision is a depiction

of the new birth, a 'putting off of the sinful nature.' Salvation presupposes repentance, as the basis of the Christian faith (Mark 1:14-15, Luke 24:46-47, Acts 2:38, Hebrews 6:1). When we come in repentance, the first thing God does is to 'circumcise' our inward nature. We are not what we were, and cannot excuse our tendencies and temptations.

Two words, easily missed, reveal this change: we are 'in him' (2:11). God accomplishes this by changing our location. We need to think of this geographically as well as spiritually; we move from being in the world to being 'in Christ.' The picture is twofold; we enter into Christ, just as Moses entered the cloud of Glory, but Christ also enters our living human spirits, bringing the life of the Holy Spirit. This is the new birth - our nature is changed; we are circumcised by putting off the sinful nature, and putting on Christ. God now lives within us and we are 'created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness' (Ephesians 4:24).

A religious ceremony was never enough; God told the Israelites: 'Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer' (Deuteronomy 10:16). If we are 'in Christ,' God has changed our heart. 'When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ' (2:13). This new life comes in two stages: firstly, he gives us spiritual life, as we receive Christ the source of life; secondly, he takes the written record of our sins and nails it to the cross with Jesus (Colossians 2:14 & Revelation 20:11-15).

Paul uses baptism as a symbol of the new birth. Believer's Baptism depicts a burial and resurrection service, proclaiming death to the old nature and

new resurrection life 'in Christ' (2:12). Here the cleansing of the body mirrors God's cleansing of the soul.

LOOK AROUND – AVOID HOLLOW PHILOSOPHIES

Next, Paul encourages us to consider the deceptions; these 'fine-sounding, arguments' are 'hollow' and 'unspiritual'; they 'have the appearance of wisdom' but 'lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence,' they cannot change the heart or change our lives. Three hollow philosophies are considered: religion, experience and diet.

FESTIVALS AND CEREMONIES: 'Do not let anyone judge you... 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' (2:16-17). It is not wrong to celebrate Christian festivals; the problem is, it is easier to attend festivals than to cultivate a relationship with God. Religion is empty, we must be 'rooted and established' in Christ not in religious observances.

EXPERIENCES: When we take experience as our spiritual guide we are in great danger. 'Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the head' (2:18-19). There are many kinds of experience; the world, the flesh and the devil can all supply counterfeit experiences (2 Corinthians 11:14). We must take our experience to the Word and measure it against the unchanging canon of scripture. Experiences are subjective but the word is an objective guide. If we do what the word says should not be done, we have lost connection with the head.

DIET: 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well' (Acts 15:28-29). The Jewish dietary laws were never applied to the church. Food and drink are not a moral issue but a human preference, like which day to worship, what to wear, or which hymn to use. The question is do we love Jesus? If so, lead a life of 'Scriptural Holiness' and avoid sexual immorality.

LOOK UP – GROW AND BE THANKFUL

Paul says, 'Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things' (Colossians 3:2). Our focus betrays our faith; are we engaging in 'human philosophy and tradition' or setting our minds on Christ?

So, what should we do? The answer is, grow and be thankful: 'just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness' (2:6-7).

We need to strengthen our faith in him. Early Christians were committed to 'the apostles' doctrine and fellowship' (Acts 2:42). This is where we are rooted; faith is strengthened in the teaching and fellowship of the local church. To be rooted in Christ, Sunday alone is not enough, hearing sermons is not enough; we must seek to know for ourselves the great mysteries of God in Christ. Christianity is not a hobby, it is a lifestyle of Scriptural Holiness. If we are in doubt about some issue, deception always seeks to re-define the word of God, by asking 'did God really say?' (Genesis 3:1).

live for eternity. All God asks is that you grow; follow Christ, and when you fall, be cleansed again by the blood of the cross.

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These studies are available in a study book edition to accompany the Bible Month 2019 with additional content and resources for house meetings. For more information: kevtherev34@hotmail.com

