

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 1 of 12

We are presently in the section of Colossians chapter two where the Apostle Paul deals with the danger of legalism in the life and thinking of the believer, and in the life and ministry of the church. As we begin today, let me read this tremendous statement for you once again. And if you are able to open your own copy of God's Word as you are listening today, I trust you will do so. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eleven. Paul writes this:

In Him [that is, in Jesus Christ] you [that is, you who have believed on Christ] were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it [that is, in the cross of Christ].

So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance [that is, the reality or the fulfillment] is of Christ.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 2 of 12

The Second of Satan's Triple Threats

The danger of legalism is the second of Satan's three great threats to believers that Paul deals with in this chapter.

As we have seen in verses one through ten, Paul first deals with the danger of the infiltration of worldly philosophy into the church. There is a constant danger that worldly philosophy will influence the way in which we look at the truth as we find it in Christ and His Word. There is a constant danger that worldly philosophy will even take the place of Christ and His Word. It has happened many times in the history of the church. So that is the first of Satan's triple threats.

And then, in the verses I just read for you, Paul deals with the second of Satan's great threats, the threat of legalism. As we have studied this passage and other related portions of Scripture we have seen that this threat has a two-fold aspect.

There is the danger of legalism first of all regarding our salvation. There is the danger of believing the lie that Christ is not enough, that we must add something to Christ in order to be saved. And then secondly there is the danger of legalism regarding our sanctification. There is the danger of believing that God's Word and God's Spirit are not enough for the work of conforming us to the image of Christ. There is the danger of saying that we need to introduce other things, other regulations, things that according to God's Word have no part in God's work of sanctification within us. And in fact these are things that can actually inhibit God's work.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 3 of 12

Our Present Question

And so at this point in our study we are asking the question, "What legalistic influences do we see in the church in our time?" How is this danger manifesting itself today? What is it that we must be on our guard against? And so we have been identifying and examining the legalistic threats in today's Evangelical church, in the light of Scripture.

Our present focus in this examination is on those influences and movements in the church today that seek to reintroduce elements of Judaism into the life and thinking and worship of the church.

In particular we have been focusing on false teachings that seek to bring elements of the Jewish ceremonial law into the Christian picture. To put it a different way, we are focusing right now on false teachings and movements that are seeking to bring elements of the Old Covenant, which was made obsolete by the person and work of Christ, into the New Covenant.

Let me remind you once again that Scripture strongly condemns any such attempt. The Apostle Paul in Galatians chapter one calls it "another gospel" which is not the true Gospel, and he declares to us that those who want to bring back these things as part of the way of salvation are under God's curse.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us in chapter ten of his epistle, that those who want to bring these Old Covenant elements into the New Covenant are trampling the Son

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 4 of 12

of God underfoot. They are counting the blood of the New Covenant in Christ a common or unclean thing. They are insulting the Spirit of Grace, the Holy Spirit of God. Dear friends, in view of these strong condemnations, we must make certain that we are not falling into this trap of the Devil, this trap of legalism.

21st Century Ceremonialism

We have already dealt with several manifestations of this kind of thing in the Evangelical church in our time. Today I want to call your attention to yet another manifestation of this kind of legalism. In our time we are seeing the re-introduction of ceremonialism, or ritualism, into the worship of the church in some parts of the postmodern Evangelical church – a return to ritualistic elements that have their roots in the Old Covenant ceremonial system. This is happening, in particular, in nominally conservative Reformed churches in our time.

What exactly is happening? What we see in growing numbers of Reformed churches today is the re-introduction of a legalistic approach to worship that focuses on ceremony. This ceremonialism, this ritualism, this kind of legalism in worship, includes six elements, and I want to name them briefly for you:

First, it involves the use of incense, bells, lamps, and candles in the worship service.

Second, it involves the use of priestly vestments – elaborate robes and symbolic accoutrements for the minister, and sometimes also for the elders and assistants.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 5 of 12

Third, this kind of legalistic worship includes processions, with banners and crosses held aloft – sometimes even a crucifix, held aloft.

Fourth, this kind of legalistic worship makes use of a restrictive, highly structured, compulsory liturgy or order of service.

Fifth, this kind of legalistic worship also involves an undue focus on the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. The Eucharist becomes the central part of the service, rather than the preaching of the Word of God. And in some cases in purportedly conservative Reformed churches today, there is even a view that the congregation's participation in the Eucharist has a saving effect on those who partake.

And finally, point six, this kind of legalistic worship introduces and involves an un-Biblical concept of what is termed "covenant renewal" – the idea that those who gather for worship each week must renew their covenant with God in order to keep it in force.

Now, you won't find all of these things in every place. The combinations vary from place to place, but in the worst cases all six of these elements that I just described are present.

Now perhaps you are asking, "Who is doing this?" Because of the nature of this danger, I need to be very specific. You will find this kind of legalistic ritualism and ceremonialism in some segments of the Presbyterian Church in America, the PCA. You will also find it in congregations of a denomination called the Confederation of

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 6 of 12

Reformed and Evangelical Churches, the CREC. You will find it in some other nominally conservative Reformed churches.

You will also find it in some groups that are aligning themselves with what they term the more conservative wing of the Emergent Church movement. But these people are not really conservative at all, they do not have a grasp of the one true Gospel. And in their case, among the Emergents, some of these people are mingling these Old Covenant elements with elements of pagan Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. They are thoroughly confused and apostate.

Now, let me say another word about the CREC and the PCA. The CREC is a hotbed of the false teaching called Federal Vision theology. It is a tremendous heresy, and that heresy is often the means by which this legalistic ritualism is introduced into the church. The PCA is also permitting Federal Vision theology to grow like a cancer within its churches. Several PCA pastors who teach Federal Vision theology have been tried on charges of heresy, but the courts of the church have found them "not guilty." And others have been allowed to teach these things without even being charged with heresy.

Now, you may be asking, "What is Federal Vision theology?" Let me put the essence of Federal Vision theology in its most basic terms. Federal Vision theology says that you are saved by being baptized with water, and that you stay saved by partaking of the Eucharist and participating in the ceremonies and rituals of the church, and by doing good works.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 7 of 12

Now if this reminds you of Roman Catholicism, it certainly should. Federal Vision theology is the teaching of Rome in false Evangelical garb, and of course Rome is the fountainhead of legalistic ritualism and ceremonialism. Federal Vision theology is a return to the legalistic darkness that saturated the church before the Protestant Reformation. One of Roman Catholicism's fatal flaws is the fact that Rome sees its priesthood as a continuation of the Old Testament priesthood, and Roman Catholicism denies the priesthood of all believers under the New Covenant instituted by Christ.

One of the first things the Protestant Reformers began to do was to eliminate these legalistic elements. They eliminated the ceremonialism and ritualism. They understood that these things were part of the Old Covenant system. They understood that these things were done away with, once and forever, by the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What Is Wrong With It?

Dear friends, there is much confusion on these issues in the church today, and the true people of God need to understand clearly what is wrong, and what is at stake. And that is why I am bringing this before you as part of our survey of the current state of the church regarding the snare of legalism.

The great theme of the writer to the Hebrews is the vast and final and eternal superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hebrews tells us that none of the Old Covenant

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 8 of 12

ceremonies and rituals saved anyone. All of it pointed to Christ. All of it prefigured various aspects of the person and work of Christ.

But now Christ has come. The reality has come. He has done what the Old Covenant priesthood and ceremony could not do. Those things only covered sin and held back God's wrath temporarily. Those things were God's way of shielding Old Testament believers from the punishment for sin, until the time when Christ would come, the Lamb of God, who would take the punishment for sin Himself, in His own body on the cross. He would institute the New Covenant in His own blood. And God the Father through Christ would do away with those old, merely symbolic, temporary, ineffectual ceremonies and rituals forever.

And that is why Paul tells us, here in Colossians chapter two, that we are to put these things aside. Your circumcision, he says, is a circumcision in Christ, "the circumcision made without hands." It is not a thing of the old ritual. The handwriting of requirements that was against us in the Old Covenant has been "wiped out". The bond of those ordinances, literally, the bill of indebtedness that those things represented, has been obliterated once and for all, by and in Christ. God "has taken it out of the way" Paul says. God has literally taken these things out of the position that they once occupied, standing between us and God, and he has nailed these things to the cross of Christ. And so, Paul says, let no one sit in judgment over you, and tell you that you must participate in these old, dead things.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 9 of 12

And dear friends, the ritualism and ceremonialism that is being reintroduced into certain elements of the postmodern Evangelical church is a return to those old, dead things. The re-introduction of elements of the Old Covenant ceremonial system, the smells, and bells, and lamps, and candles; the vestments; the processions; the symbolism – the reintroduction of those things tramples the Son of God underfoot. In the culture of Judaism, one of the ways in which someone showed the utmost contempt for some person or some thing was to walk on top of that person or thing, to tread that person or thing underfoot. That is exactly what this 21st century ceremonialism and ritualism is doing.

The undue focus on the Eucharist rather than on the preaching of the Word makes the blood of the New Covenant in Christ a common thing. The strict compulsory liturgy that you will find in many of these circles today is an insult to the Spirit of grace.

The wrong view of the covenants that often accompanies this legalistic ritualism is a denial of the all-sufficiency of Christ. We do not come before God in worship each week to renew a covenant with Him. We do not partake of the Lord's Supper as a "meal of covenant renewal" – which is the term that many of these legalistic, ritualistic churches are using today. No, dear friends. When true believers in Christ come together to worship Him, we are commemorating the blessed fact that we who are by nature covenant breakers, we who cannot possibly keep God's covenant, have been brought into a right relationship with God by believing on Jesus Christ, the seed

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 10 of 12

of Abraham, because Christ fulfilled all the requirements of God's eternal covenant on our behalf, once for all.

All of this return to legalistic ritualism is also a denial of Christ's stated purpose for His church, as we find it in the Great Commission. The elements of the Great Commission, Christ's purposes for His church, are two and only two. And we can sum them up in two words – evangelism, and edification. "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel" – that's evangelism. "Teaching them [teaching those who believe the Gospel] to observe all things that I have commanded you" – that's edification.

But this return to legalistic ritual is non-evangelistic. At best it obscures the Gospel in a fog of legalism, and at its worst it openly denies the Gospel. And, this return to legalistic ritual is non-edifying. It focuses people's minds and hearts on entering into a legalistic ceremony, rather than focusing them on true growth in Christ through the preaching of the Word.

What Is the Answer?

Dear friend, based on the things we have seen from the Word of God in this message, let me say this in all sincerity. If you are in a church that is doing these things, get out immediately. You are in a deadly place. You are in a place where Christ is being trampled underfoot. You are in a place where the Spirit of Grace is being insulted. If you are truly trusting in Christ alone for your salvation, by grace, through faith, apart from any works or rituals, then a church that does these things is foreign territory for you. You do not belong there.

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 11 of 12

Dear friends, the Apostle Paul tells us in Colossians chapter two that we need to put up, and keep up, a solid battle front against this threat of Satan, this threat of legalism. And so what is the answer? What is the bulwark? What is our defense against these things? It is "the simplicity that is in Christ." It is the all-sufficiency of Christ. It is the supremacy of the Great Commission, giving the primary place to preaching in the church. It is reliance upon the authority and the working of the Holy Spirit. It is the recognition that the leadership of the church is not the Holy Spirit, and that we must never quench the Spirit, First Thessalonians 5:19 – literally, we must never do anything that will extinguish the operation of the Spirit within our own hearts, and within the church, especially as the church meets in worship.

And let me close with this, the inspired words of encouragement and warning written by the Apostle Paul to the Galatian church in Galatians chapter five, beginning at verse one. First, the encouragement: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."

And then, the warning: "Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised" – and here Paul is using circumcision as a representation of the entire ceremonial system –

If you rely on that system, Paul says, "Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised [I testify to every man who relies upon

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Ritualism Among the Reformed" (Colossians 2:11-17, Galatians 5:1-6)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/10/2011

Page 12 of 12

any part of the ceremonial system] that he is a debtor to keep the whole law" – the whole system.

Listen carefully to what Paul says next. Listen carefully to this warning. If you are entering back into these old, dead things, Paul says, "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we" – he says, we who are done with these things, we who recognize that they are done away with in Christ – "we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love" (Galatians 5:1-6).

About the Broadcast – How You Can Help

The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is to preach the Gospel to the lost, and to equip believers to stand upon and live by the sole authority of God's Word, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The prayers of our listeners and supporters are vital to this ministry. Thank you for praying for us.

The broadcast is supported entirely by the gifts of God's people. If the Lord leads you to help us, you can do so in any of these ways:

- Call us toll-free at 888-804-9655 to give a gift using your credit card
- Give a gift by credit card at our secure website, www.teachingtheword.org
- Mail your contribution to TTW, Box 2533, Westminster, Maryland 21158

TeachingtheWord Ministries is recognized as a tax-exempt religious organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the U. S. Internal Revenue Code. Your gifts are fully tax deductible.

**May the Lord richly bless your personal study
of His inspired, infallible, inerrant Word.**