

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "How To Confront Counterfeit Revelation" (Colossians 2:18-23, 1 Peter 3:15-16)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 1 of 13

---

At the present time we are focusing on a very important statement that we find in Colossians chapter two, verse eighteen. This statement consists of just nine words in the English Bible. But those nine words tell us the essential difference between true doctrine and false doctrine.

So if you are able to do so, I trust that you will turn to Colossians with me in your own copy of God's Word. I want to read this entire section for us once again. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. The Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, writes this:

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, and not holding fast to the Head [that is, to our Lord Jesus Christ], from whom all the body [that is, the entire true Church of Christ], nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.

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 — "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

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Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 2 of 13

---

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. (Colossians 2:18-23)

### **The Nature of Counterfeit Revelation**

Now, as we have seen, this section of Colossians chapter two is a warning against the threat of man-made doctrines, counterfeit doctrines, making their way into the life and thinking of the Christian as an individual and the church as a body.

And in verse eighteen we find this striking statement about the nature of counterfeit doctrines. Paul says that the man or woman who brings such things into the church is "intruding into those things which he has not seen." "Intruding into those things which he has not seen." In our last message we saw exactly what this means in the context of the situation that confronted the Colossian church.

The men and women who were trying to bring counterfeit revelation into the Colossian church claimed that they had actually seen the things they were trying to introduce, that they had studied these things carefully.

But the Apostle Paul, in this one short phrase in verse eighteen, tells us that this is simply not true. He says that these false teachers are intruding into those things which they have not seen.

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 3 of 13

---

Paul then goes on to tell us the actual origin of these things. And he does this both positively and negatively. He tells us where these things do come from, and just as importantly, he tells us where they do not come from. He says, verse eighteen, that these things actually originate in the mind of the sinful flesh. That is his positive statement about the origin of counterfeit revelation. It comes from the fleshly mind. That is one side of the reason that these things are counterfeits.

But just as importantly, he goes on in verse nineteen to tell us the negative. He says that these things are counterfeits because these people are "not holding fast to the Head" of the church, to Jesus Christ. The literal meaning is that they do not *possess* the Head. They do not possess Christ. The falsehoods that they are trying to bring into the church demonstrate that these people are not regenerated saints of God.

The people who invent counterfeit doctrines, who insist on promoting them and will not repent, may appear to be Christians for a time. But eventually they fail the test. In our last message we saw that Paul warned Timothy about this in Second Timothy chapter four. The time will come, Paul says, when these people "will not endure sound doctrine." They will go after fables, after counterfeits, and they will go after false teachers who invent such things.

And the word that is translated "intruded" here in Colossians chapter two, verse eighteen literally means that the people who claim to bring new revelations into the church are taking their stand upon things which they had not seen. To put it

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 4 of 13

---

even more literally, they were “treading on air.” The teachings they were attempting to bring into the church were absolutely without foundation.

### **A Wrong Emphasis in Apologetics**

Now as we continue today, I want to focus our attention on a very important question: How are we to answer counterfeit revelation in our time? How are we to deal with it? In answering that question let me first address a very serious problem in the church in our time that has a very direct bearing on the answer.

We live in a time when there is a great emphasis on apologetics in many segments of the Evangelical church – being ready to give an answer to false belief systems. But we have come to a point where quite often there is a wrong emphasis in this matter of apologetics.

What do I mean by that? I mean simply this: The emphasis in apologetics in our time is, quite often, an emphasis on becoming an *expert* on false religions, an *expert* on cults, an *expert* on evolutionary thinking, an *expert* on atheism, and so on.

The thinking behind it is this: That Christians have to become experts on these things in order to be able to *refute* them. In order to become a good apologist who can refute Roman Catholicism, you must become an expert on the false teachings of Roman Catholicism. In order to become a good apologist who can refute

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 5 of 13

---

Mormonism, you must become an expert on the false teachings of Mormonism, and so on.

There are men today who put themselves forward as experts in these areas, and they have developed what they call apologetics ministries, and they go around debating Roman Catholics and Mormons and the representatives of other false belief systems.

And coupled with this is another line of thinking. This line of thinking is a mindset that has become popular in some Evangelical circles. And it goes like this: That today man has become a superior intellect who requires superior answers. The old answers won't suffice.

Dear friends, this is a serious problem, a serious fallacy, in present-day apologetics. I have actually heard men from some of the leading Evangelical apologetics ministries in the United States tell their audiences that the Bible is no longer enough. I have actually heard some of these men tell their Christian audiences that the Gospel is no longer enough. They are telling people that you need to present all these other evidences. You need to present all these other arguments. You need to be able to refute all of the opposition's arguments.

### **You Don't Need to Become an Expert on Falsehood**

And what effect does this kind of thinking have on the average Christian? The effect is that the average Christian can begin to think that these spokesmen for

---

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 6 of 13

---

apologetics ministries are right – that the Bible is not enough, that the Gospel is not enough. And so the average Christian begins to think in one of two ways. The average Christian either thinks, "I must become an expert on this or that false belief system so that I can refute it." And so that is how that person spends all his time. Or else the average Christian thinks, "I don't have the time or the ability to do that, and so I can't possibly be ready to give an effective defense of the faith." And so he keeps quiet.

Dear friends, all of this is a tragedy for the church. Both of these lines of thinking are untrue. You do not need to become an expert on all the intricate details of false religions and cults in order to know that they are absolutely wrong. You do not need to become an expert on false religions and cults in order to know that they lead souls to Hell and not to Heaven.

You do not need to have your nose buried in the records of the Vatican councils in order to answer the false teachings of Roman Catholicism. You do not need to study the Book of Mormon in order to answer the lies of Mormonism. You do not need to become an expert on Buddhism, or Hinduism, or Confucianism, or Islam, or Scientology, or the Unification Church, or Seventh-Day Adventism, or Christian Science, or the New Apostolic Movement, or the latest perversion of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, in order to be able to give an answer to these things.

Dear friends, that is not where we as Christians need to place our emphasis. I know people who spend so much of their time learning about counterfeit

---

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 7 of 13

---

revelations of various kinds, and learning man-made apologetic methods – they spend so much time on that, that they have lost their grasp of God's genuine revelation and how God tells us to declare it.

And that is a real danger, dear friends. You need to be in the Word of God. You need to base your stand upon the Word of God. You need to view all things through the lens of Divine Revelation. You have no reason to fear that you will be unable to answer this or that point of some counterfeit revelation.

What you need to do is to understand not so much what these false religions and cults say about themselves, but what the Word of God says about them. And according to the Word of God they are all under the same condemnation, and all for the same reason.

### **The One Vital Fact You Need to Know**

In fact, when it comes down to it you need to know one very vital thing. You need to know one fact – one fact that the Word of God tells us is true of each and every one of them.

And that one vital fact is this: The teachings of all false religions and all cults are founded upon counterfeit revelation. Men and women intruding into those things which they have not seen, vainly puffed up by the mind of sinful flesh, totally disconnected from the authority and revelation that is found in and through the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, their problem at its

---

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 8 of 13

---

core, at its root, is not a problem of facts and evidences. Their problem is simply that they refuse to submit to the Word of God. Their problem is not an intellectual problem. It is a spiritual problem.

Their counterfeit revelations may take the form of alleged visions. They may be set down in some book. They may be put forward in the form of a theory. They may come in the form of a pronouncement or declaration from some religious or philosophical group. They may come from the mouth of some man or woman standing behind a pulpit.

Counterfeit revelations come in many forms. But in each and every case, all of these people put forth counterfeit revelation *instead* of Scripture, or in *addition* to Scripture, or to supposedly "explain" Scripture in a way that no one else has ever understood Scripture before. They refuse to bow the knee to the unique and absolute authority of God and His Word.

### **Why Do We Have Today's Epidemic of Counterfeits?**

Why do we have this epidemic of counterfeit revelation in the present day – not only out in the world, but also especially within the church? We have this epidemic of counterfeit revelation because people who identify themselves as Evangelical Christians have lost their grasp of this central fact: That the Bible alone is the Word of God, and that God's Word alone is our source of authority.



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Title: "How To Confront Counterfeit Revelation" (Colossians 2:18-23, 1 Peter 3:15-16)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 9 of 13

---

*Sola Scriptura* – Scripture Alone! That was the great rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation. And it must become the church's rallying cry once again if we are to stand against the tide of counterfeit revelation that Satan is trying to bring into the church. It is a great irony that in supposedly "defending the faith" today, much of the church and even many of today's apologetics ministries have put Scripture over in the corner, and they have trotted out all of these other things, as though the Word of God were not enough.

Yes, dear friends, it is helpful to be able to answer people's objections to the truth. It is helpful to be able to answer specific points of counterfeit revelations. But you are only going to be able to do that if you answer with the truth – and you are only going to find the truth in one place, and that is the Word of God.

Listen to me carefully: Answering people's objections to the truth, answering the points of counterfeit revelations, is not going to bring people to salvation. In fact, one thing we need to recognize is that counterfeit revelations are always moving targets, constantly changing. There will always be new elements to their false teachings.

I believe it was Charles Spurgeon who said that the only thing that is new in theology is heresy. And that has never been so evident as it is in our time, a time when a new counterfeit revelation can begin in one local church today, and by next week or next month it can spread around the world over the Internet and over the radio and television.

---

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 10 of 13

---

## **The Nature of True Biblical Apologetics**

So dear friends, how are genuine Christians to deal with this epidemic of counterfeit revelation? What is the true nature of Christian apologetics? We find the answer in First Peter chapter three, beginning at verse fifteen. Turn there with me in your Bible if you are able right now – First Peter chapter three, verse fifteen. We read this:

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense [in the original Greek, an *apologian*, a reasoned answer] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.

What does this passage tell us? It tells us that we must think and act in a way that is the exact opposite of the thinking and acting of the false teachers that Paul describes for us in Colossians chapter two. Let me put before you five points of contrast between true believers and the promoters of counterfeit revelation:

Number one, they are intruding into those things which they have not seen. We need to testify of that which we have seen, the written Word of God.

Number two, they put forth counterfeit revelations, false belief systems, in the pride of the flesh. We are to give a reasoned answer for the hope that is within us, with “meekness and fear” – literally, with humility and respect.

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 11 of 13

---

Number three, they put forth counterfeit revelations, false belief systems, because they are “not holding fast to the Head” – the Lord Jesus Christ. They don’t possess Christ. We, on the other hand, we who are truly believers, do possess Christ, and we are to “sanctify the Lord God in our hearts” – literally, God is to be the Lord of our hearts, the Lord of our thinking, the Lord of our answer to counterfeit revelation. And that means that the written Word of our Lord God must be the defense upon which we stand, the source of our reasoned answer to counterfeit revelations.

Number four, they trust in their own flesh for results. We are not to trust in our own flesh. We are not to trust in our own ability to always say all of the right words in just the right way. We are to trust in God the Holy Spirit. Peter says here, act and speak in such a way that those who oppose you will see your good conduct in Christ and be ashamed – literally, that they may be confounded, that their promotion of their false teachings may be thrown into disorder. In other words, dear friends, Christians are not to operate by the unbelievers’ rules. When Paul says, in Colossians 1:18, “Let no man cheat you of your reward,” he is literally saying, “do not let the false teachers make the rules.” You don’t operate by their rules. You operate by God’s authority.

And lastly, number five, that means that while the false teachers worry about their reputations and try to protect their reputations in sinful pride, we are not to worry about our reputations. We are to do what God tells us to do, and leave our reputations in His hands.

---

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Title: "How To Confront Counterfeit Revelation" (Colossians 2:18-23, 1 Peter 3:15-16)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 12 of 13

---

## **Paul at Mars Hill: Biblical Apologetics in Action**

And this is exactly what we find in the book of Acts chapter seventeen, when the Apostle Paul comes to Mars Hill in Athens. We read there that the pagan philosophers who gathered on Mars Hill “spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” They had their idols, which represented all of their manifold counterfeit belief systems, on display all over the city.

But did Paul first become an expert on all their false teachings? Did he try to keep up with all of their moving targets? No. Paul simply declared the truth of God to them. He declared to them the one source of genuine authority. He proclaimed to them salvation in Christ. He understood their one real need. He spoke to their one real need. And so he testified to that which he had seen. He did it with humility and respect. He did it on the authority of Christ and His Word. And he trusted God for the results.

And what were the results? We are told, Acts chapter seventeen beginning at verse thirty-two, that “some mocked.” Others said, “We’re willing to listen to you again, some time.” And, we are told, verse thirty-four – and I’m giving you a literal rendering of the Greek – we are told that “*a certain few* joined him and believed.” Some mocked Paul and his message. Some put him off. But a certain few, those of God’s calling, those of God’s choosing, believed.

Dear friend, that is how God uses our testimony. God uses it to show the hardness of the hearts of some. God uses it to plant a seed that He may later bring

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Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 8/26/2012

Page 13 of 13

---

to spiritual life in others. God uses it to remove the supposed excuses of unbelievers. These people in Athens, every one of them, were now without excuse before God, because Paul was a faithful messenger of God. But others, a certain few, God immediately changed from spiritual death to spiritual life by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

But in every case, God did the work. We must do our part, and we must trust God for His sovereign hand in the results. That, dear friends, is our answer. That is the Christian's only place of confidence, as we confront counterfeit revelation.

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