

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Who Is the True 'Vicar of Christ'?" (Colossians 2:18-23)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 4/22/2012

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We are continuing our study of the Apostle Paul's great inspired statement against the tyranny of man-made doctrines, which we find in Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. Let me read that passage for you as we open God's Word once again today. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen:

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 Jesus Christ], from whom all the body, 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?

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)

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Man-Made Doctrines: An Evil From the Beginning

Now, we have been going into considerable detail in our study of this passage. It is very important for us to do so. As we look at the Word of God from beginning to end, we find the tyranny of man-made doctrines all the way from beginning to end.

At the beginning of Genesis, in chapter four, we find Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, attempting to invent his own way to please God. And we find God making a decisive statement against this. We find God categorically rejecting Cain's offering of the work of his own labor as a sacrifice for sins, and we find God accepting the bloody animal sacrifice of Cain's brother Abel, a sacrifice which prefigured the ultimate sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on the cross.

And we find not only the existence of man-made doctrines at that very early moment in history. We also find the ugly tyranny of man-made doctrines asserting itself. In his rebellion, Cain killed his brother Abel. Abel was the first martyr for the Gospel. And since that day, those who have invented man-made doctrines of various kinds have continued to rise up, and in many cases they have persecuted and even killed those who stand for the truth and for the authority of God and His Word.

The Greatest Tyranny in Church History

As we look at history, especially church history over the past two thousand years, one entity stands out as the great enemy of those who stand for the authority

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of Christ and the authority of His Word. And of course, that entity is Roman Catholicism.

Roman Catholicism is the greatest inventor and promoter of man-made doctrines in church history. As we look at the historical record, we find that Roman Catholicism, through its Inquisition and its other persecutions, has been responsible for the martyrdom of countless multitudes of those who have stood for the one true faith. And those persecutions continue in some parts of the world even in the present day.

The tyranny of man-made doctrines manifests itself nowhere to a greater extent than it does in the false religion called Roman Catholicism.

As we have seen in our previous studies, Roman Catholicism relies upon counterfeit authority to invent and propagate its man-made doctrines. Roman Catholicism relies upon counterfeit authority to hold millions of people in spiritual bondage. Roman Catholicism relies upon counterfeit authority in many parts of the world to persecute those who stand for authentic Biblical Christianity.

Why Study Roman Catholicism in Church History?

Now, some of you may be wondering why we are spending such a significant amount of time in this study examining the influence of Roman Catholicism in church history. The reason is this: The vast majority of people within the Evangelical church today, and I would venture to say even the vast majority of

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Evangelical pastors today, do not understand the vast difference between Roman Catholicism and authentic Biblical Christianity. The vast majority within the Evangelical church have forgotten what it means to be a Protestant – or perhaps, more to the point, in the present generation they have never understood what it means to be a Protestant, because they have never been taught.

The vast majority within the Evangelical church do not understand that the difference between authentic Biblical Christianity and Roman Catholicism is the difference between Heaven and Hell for eternity. Dear friend, this is something that you must know, that you must understand. For the sake of your own soul. For the sake of the souls of your loved ones and friends. For the sake of your local church.

Today, many Evangelicals think that it is a fine and noble thing to try to patch over fundamental theological differences with the Roman Catholic church. Today, many Evangelicals believe that it is a fine and noble thing to make common cause with Roman Catholicism in opposing the moral and spiritual evils of our time. Today, many Evangelicals even go so far as to say that Evangelicals and Rome agree on the Gospel.

Dear friends, these are lies. These are deceptions of the Devil. The one true Gospel is the Gospel of justification by God's grace alone, through empty-handed faith alone, in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone. Rome's false gospel is a gospel of justification by the authority of a man-made church hierarchy based on

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the works of the flesh plus Christ. There is a Heaven-and-Hell difference between those two positions.

Dear friends, we have seen that in this passage in Colossians, one of the points the Apostle Paul is making is that man-made doctrines are always founded on counterfeit authority. In chapter two, verse eighteen, when Paul says, "Let no one cheat you of your reward," this could actually be translated, "Let no human being disqualify you for salvation."

Roman Catholicism, through the Pope, claims to have that authority. But the Apostle Paul says that God has given that authority to no man. That authority belongs to Christ the righteous judge alone.

"The Vicar of Christ"

How is it that Roman Catholicism has usurped that authority? Permit me to answer that question by giving us a brief lesson in church history.

Rome has claimed unique authority for the Pope for nearly 1700 years. Today the Pope is called in Roman Catholic terminology "the vicar of Christ" – the sole authorized representative of Christ on earth. The official Roman Catholic catechism says that:

"The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful."

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“For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise.”

But the popes were not always called “the vicar of Christ.” At first, during the period of the disintegration of the Roman Empire, the pope became known as “the vicar of Caesar” – in other words, the rightful heir to the Caesars who had ruled the vast Roman Empire. The pope of Rome was given the same title that the Caesars had held – the title of “Supreme Pontiff” which the Pope still claims today.

It was not until the eighth century that the popes began to take the title of not simply “the vicar of Caesar” but “the vicar of Christ.” And in the centuries since that time, the popes of Rome have established a vast hierarchy of men to enforce this authority around the world.

These men carry a wide range of titles, some of which are familiar to us, but many of which are not. There are, among the hierarchy of men serving the pope, those who carry the title of cardinal, or patriarch, or major archbishop, or metropolitan, or coadjutor archbishop, or diocesan bishop, or coadjutor bishop, or episcopal vicar, or eparche, or apostolic vicar, or apostolic prefect, or apostolic administrator, or vicar general. All of these are titles in the vast Roman Catholic hierarchy that enforces counterfeit papal authority.

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The Roman Catholic catechism says that, "The Pope enjoys, by divine institution, supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls" as the vicar of Christ on earth.

And the present pope, like others before him, has declared that the Roman Catholic church is "the only instrument for the salvation of all humanity." Such is the counterfeit authority that Rome claims. And the papacy claims to have the power to disqualify an individual from salvation by pronouncing what the church calls an anathema upon that individual. The declaration of anathema includes these words: "We (that is, the Pope) judge him condemned to eternal fire with Satan and his angels and all the reprobate, so long as he will not burst the fetters of the demon, do penance and appease the Church..."

Antichrist

Dear friends, what does Scripture say in contrast to this? Paul says, Colossians 2:18, "Let no one cheat you of your reward," – literally, "Let no human being disqualify you for salvation."

In his second epistle, the Apostle John warns that "many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess" the true doctrine of Jesus Christ. "This," he says, "is a deceiver and an antichrist" (2 John 7).

The word "antichrist" in the English Bible is a direct transliteration of the word in Greek - *antichristos*. Although the prefix *anti* means "against" in present-day

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English, in New Testament Greek it meant more. It also meant "in place of" or "usurping." John is saying that the one who teaches heresy concerning Jesus Christ is not only opposed to the true Christ, but is also usurping the authority and position of Jesus Christ. John speaks of this also in his first epistle, in chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen:

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that He has promised us - eternal life. These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. (1 John 2:18-26)

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"Even Now, Many Antichrists Have Come"

Dear friends, there have been many antichrists throughout church history, and we live in a time of many antichrists today.

Many in the postmodern Evangelical church, are diminishing - and thereby effectively denying - the full deity of Jesus Christ by emphasizing His humanity in a way that reduces Jesus to a sinful caricature of the true God-man. I heard of a so-called Evangelical preacher who said that Jesus was "the kind of guy you could go have a beer with on Saturday night." That, dear friends, is pure and simple blasphemy!

Many contemporary men and movements, by inventing and promoting man-made doctrines, are usurping the rightful position and authority of Christ as Head of His Church. As Paul puts it in Colossians, such an imposter is "vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, 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" (Colossians 2:18-19).

In our day Roman Catholicism continues its centuries-long history of usurping the authority and position of Jesus Christ through the falsehood of the papacy. Indeed, Rome calls the Pope "the vicar of Christ" which is rooted in the Latin for "the vice-Christ" or "the one in place of Christ" - in effect, the Latin form of the Greek *antichristos*.

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This is a large subject for full exposition at another time, but I believe that Scripture strongly indicates that the Roman papacy is the Antichrist, and that the Beast and False Prophet of Revelation will be the final manifestations of the power of Antichrist in a one-world religion under the auspices of Rome.

Christ Sent Not a Pope, But the Holy Spirit

Dear friends, the Pope of Rome is not the vicar of Christ. The One whom Jesus Christ and God the Father sent into this world to act in the place of Christ in the Church on earth is not the Pope of Rome, but God the Holy Spirit indwelling each and every individual who is truly born from above.

Only God the Holy Spirit has legitimate claim to the title of "vicar of Christ" if such a title is to be given at all. Listen to the words of Jesus:

John 14:16-17 – "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever — the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."

John 15:26 – "But when the Helper [the Holy Spirit] comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me."

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John 16:13 – "...when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come."

The False Vicar vs. the True

In contrast to this, the counterfeit nature of the Pope's claim to be "the Vicar of Christ" is shown by his teachings and his actions.

Jesus said that in Holy Scripture we have "all truth." The Holy Spirit glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ in opening that truth to us. God the Holy Spirit is the one who has infallible teaching authority.

But in stark contrast to this, the Pope claims to possess "infallible teaching authority." In claiming this counterfeit authority the Pope takes the glory of Christ for himself, and he dishonors the Holy Spirit.

By means of crucifixes, rosaries, and scapulars, and other icons and idols, the Pope claims the authority to defeat Satan.

The popes of our time still issue indulgences, which they claim can shorten the sufferings of souls in purgatory – a place that is an invention of their man-made doctrines.

The popes preside over what is undoubtedly the richest financial institution in the world, and yet they encourage people who are in bondage to Roman Catholicism to take vows of poverty to earn merit with the church.

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Even though the worst kinds of immorality are an open scandal within the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and even though the Bible condemns those who forbid people to marry, the popes still insist on vows of celibacy for their priests and nuns.

The popes claim the authority to pronounce annulments that release people from marriage vows even when they have been married to each other for decades.

Dear friends, such things are a shame and an offense to Christ. Such things would be absolutely foreign to a true and faithful representative of Christ on earth.

All of this is rooted in the things that Paul warns against in Colossians chapter two – “taking delight in false humility” – “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 Jesus Christ]” – a return to “the basic principles of the world” which are foreign to the true believer in Christ – subjecting people to man-made 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” – things that “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.”

How Will You Respond?

Dear friend, if you are listening today and you are a Roman Catholic, I pray that God the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see the bondage that you are under. I pray that God the Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see the true freedom from sin

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and death that can only come by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone, apart from popes and hierarchies and rituals and penance.

Dear friend, if you are a believer listening today and perhaps you have not previously understood the vast and essential difference between the counterfeit authority of Roman Catholicism and the true authority of Christ and His Word and His Spirit, I hope and pray that your eyes have been opened to these things. "Let no one cheat you of your reward." Hold fast, dear friend, to the only true Head of the true Church, the Lord Jesus Christ.

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The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is that of the Great Commission: to preach the Gospel to the world, 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.

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