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Sermon Brief
Text: Col. 2:6-23
Title: Substitute Religion
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Over the past three weeks on Wednesday evenings, we have been taking a close look at Paul's discussion of the false teaching that was floating around in the house churches of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis in the Lycus Valley during the late 50s of the first Christian century. In the detailed examination of this on Wednesday evenings several insights emerged to those present that have vital relevance to what is happening in much of Christianity in our world. And I believe they are important for our church as a whole to grasp, lest we fall prey to the same sort of things that are crippling churches all over the place in our world, as well as in this ancient setting of the Lycus Valley in western Turkey.

Paul's most detailed analysis of the issues are found in Col. 2:6-23. Turn with me to this text and follow as I read it.

6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 12 when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, 14 erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

16 Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. 17 These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

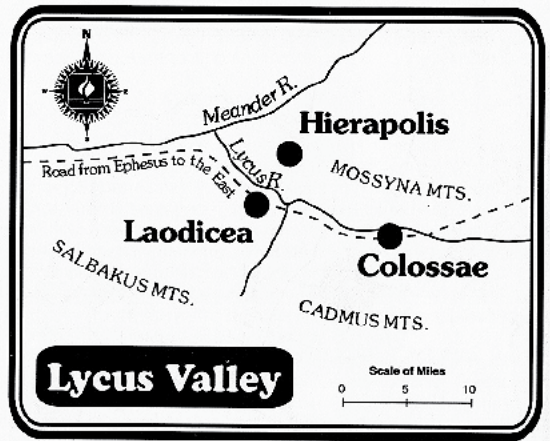
20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"? 22 All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

Some basic things are important to understand at the outset that have come out of our Wednesday evening studies. 1) From all indications the false teaching in the Lycus Valley was 'home grown' rather than imported from elsewhere. Much of the false teaching that is condemned in the letters of the New Testament was imported from elsewhere. False teachers from Palestine traveled to Galatia to follow behind Paul and his associates to "correct" the deficiencies of the apostolic gospel by claiming that in order to become a Christian one had to first convert to Judaism and then believe in Christ. Much of the same thing appears to have been the case at Ephesus (cf. 1-2 Timothy), Corinth (1-2 Corinthians), Cyprus (Titus) and elsewhere as addressed by Jude and 2 Peter. But the false teaching at Colossian is described differently than in these other scripture texts. No clear signal is given in Colossians suggesting the people had come from elsewhere into the church groups of the Lycus Valley bringing their version of the gospel.

In our day we face corrupting ideas in our churches from both sources. From the outside, TV preachers -- in my estimation -- have done more damage to the cause of Christ than all of the supposed liberal professors of theology in all of the seminaries and divinity schools. By mixing a little bit of gospel and a whole lot of secular materialism they have created substitute religions all over the place. But in over fifty years of ministry in many different churches on both sides of the Atlantic I have witnessed absolutely strange teachings that originated inside the church. They almost always came from individual members who knew very little about the Bible, but thought they were experts and found secret 'keys' for unlocking the mysteries of scripture

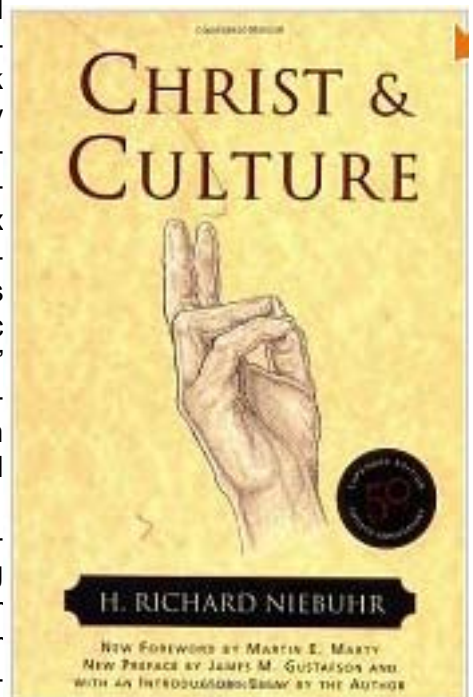
teaching. I once had a person tell me the Bible predicted the creation of the automobile, and then proceeded to quote some text from the Old Testament that in the King James Version seemed to justify his thinking. But careful checking of the scripture revealed that it had absolutely nothing to do with the modern automobile. In fact the entire idea that the Bible would even be concerned to predict the invention of the automobile is ludicrous from the outset!

2) The moral and cultural climate of the Lycus Valley made it open for perversions of the Christian gospel to develop locally. The settlers of this small region were basically Phrygians, Greeks, and Jews who had migrated into this area along the Lycus River centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. Added to this was that the Lycus Valley was a major intersection of north-south and east-west trade routes for that part of the Roman Empire. The trade passing through also brought in influences from far and wide into this area. Numerous temples to different pagan gods were scattered through these three cities. Large numbers of Jewish settlers live and worshiped God in the valley. The Romans maintained substantial military garrisons there as well. Among several ancient Roman and Greek historians the region is described as very open minded and tolerant of new ideas. Even several of the religious traditions, both pagan and Jewish, took on traits that distinguished them from their counterparts elsewhere in the empire. The Judaism of the Lycus Valley was known for its tendency to incorporate pagan ideas into its worship of God in the synagogue.



What seems to have evolved in the Lycus Valley with this false teaching is the tendency to take a little bit of gospel preached to them by Epaphras who was one of the early 'church planters' there according to Col. 1:7-8. They then picked up elements of Judaism and paganism from around them and put all three together in order to create their substitute religion.

The relationship of our religious faith to the cultural and social world we live in poses ongoing challenges. Many years ago, the Lutheran theologian and ethicist Richard Niebuhr produced a definitive book called *Christ And Culture*. In this he discusses five ways that Christianity interacts with the culture surrounding it: 1) Christ against Culture (separationist); 2) Christ of Culture (accommodationism); 3) Christ above Culture (synthesizing religion and culture); 4) Christ and Culture in Paradox (ongoing tension between religion and culture); and 5) Christ Transforming Culture (utopianism). Although his assessment is complex and has limitations,¹ Niebuhr did succeed in calling attention to one of the basic challenges that Christians face. Put simply, how can we be 'in the world,' but not 'of the world'? Christianity down through the centuries has consistently failed to maintain the necessary balance and tension between its commitment to Christ and the influences of the surrounding cultural world.



Those advocating a substitute religion at Colossae sought to accommodate the gospel to the surrounding Gospel. Their false thinking was that by blending elements from their surrounding world into their gospel understanding, they would come up with a better, more superior version of the Christian faith than was being taught by Paul and his associates. Boy is that a pattern of thinking wide spread in our world! They failed to see that the gospel puts continual tension between the believer and his cultural world. Paul's severe condemnation of this false teaching calls for a continuous focus on the Christ of conversion and an unconditional commitment to Him.

I want to raise two basic questions from our text today: what is substitute religion, and why is it bad? In his treatment of the false teaching at Colossae the apostle Paul provides some depiction of what this teaching contained, but he spends most of his efforts in characterizing the ruinous impact of this teaching. It is out of this structure of presentation by Paul that I want to speak to you today.

¹Cf. the critique of Angus J.L. Menuge, "Niebuhr's Christ and Culture Reexamined," *Christ and Culture in Dialogue*.

BODY

I. What is substitute religion?

What was being taught at Colossae? Two aspects of this teaching are put on the table by the apostle: its ideas and some of its practices.

The content of the false teaching. Paul labels it in 2:8 as a *'philosophy'* (φιλοσοφία). In the world of that day 'philosophy' was understood to mean the way a person sought to make sense out of life based upon a perception of reality. In our world the word philosophy has taken on a more restrictive meaning and become identified with a branch of education. The point of Paul's label was simply to indicate that those pushing this teaching were presenting it as the best way to understand life and how to cope with the stresses and challenges of everyday living. Clearly this was also the point of the apostolic gospel as well. Among the ancient philosophers theology was considered to be one of the critical sources for forming a philosophy. Thus this false teaching simply sought to either replace the gospel or, more likely, to 'supplement' it with additions that supposedly corrected 'deficiencies' believed to be present in the apostolic gospel.

People in our day still move the same direction. God in His providence has given us the Bible, containing the New Testament. New Age thinking seeks to replace the teachings of Jesus and the apostles with a mixture of ideas taken from many sources. Why? Because in the minds of many 'New Agers' Christianity doesn't answer life's problems. Or, more often, it gives answers that these people don't like. Cultic groups such as Mormons take the stance that additional writings are necessary in order to supplement the teachings of the New Testament. Thus the Book of Mormon attempts to both 'correctly' interpret the Bible and to extend its teachings in order to achieve a 'more perfect' religion.

All of this both at Colossae and in our day reflects the fact that we humans tend to not be satisfied with what God has provided us. Somehow the religious claims in scripture aren't adequate, or else they're 'offensive' to modern tastes. And so we go about creating new religions to substitute the one God has provided in Jesus Christ. It reflects the apostle Paul's critique in Rom. 1:22-23:

22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 23 and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Three times in our text Paul labels this false teaching as based upon 'human tradition': v. 8 'according to human tradition'; v. 18, 'a human way of thinking'; v. 22, 'human commands and teachings.' He vigorously asserts that God has no connection to this teaching. It originates solely from the minds of sinful people, and yet claims to be superior to what God has provided in Christ.

At the heart of this teaching lay the claim that one could not directly come in contact with God because of the corruption of the material world. Consequently they demanded the 'worship of angels' (v. 18) as an integral part of their religion. In the underlying philosophy of platonic dualism the idea was that reality consists of two parts: the visible realm of material reality that one can touch, taste, smell, hear, see etc., and the invisible realm that lays beyond our ability to grasp with sensory experience. We can only make limited contact with that world through rigid education and disciplining of our minds and thinking. But as long as we are in this material body we can't have direct contact with that world because it is completely pure and we are totally corrupt. Consequently, our contact with the god who exists in this invisible world must be made through intermediaries. An so a system of 'stoas' was put forth standing between these two realms of supposed reality. Those closest to the visible world had traits dominated by this world, but those closest to the invisible world were closer to the supposed purity of that realm. We mortals contact those 'angels' closest to us and they pass the message 'up the ladder' until it finally reaches Christ who stands at the top of the scale just below the ultimate purity of God. The language used by Paul here has strong echoes of what later became known as Christian Gnosticism in the second century. Up until the last fifty years, most scholars were convinced that the false teaching at Colossae was an early form of the later Gnosticism. But most scholars today only see some of the common traits of the later Gnosticism that have the same origin in Platonic dualism. The Colossian heresy was not well developed, and does not represent a single source of teaching as did the Gnostic teachings of Valentinus and others beginning in the second century.

But one of those traits was the claim to possessing a *superior 'wisdom'* (cf. v. 23, "an appearance of wisdom"). Certainly the later Gnostics made this claim as well, and insisted that it was gained by a highly emotionally charged religious experience subsequent to faith confession of Jesus and that it resulted in one being able to 'speak in tongues'. Such an experience was essential to the perfecting of one's soul, and thus completed the salvation experience. The Colossian teaching claimed such superior wisdom, but evidently didn't move into the subsequent demands and claims that were typical of Gnosticism later on. Instead, they claimed superiority for this so-called wisdom largely based on 'visions' (v. 18). By-passing scripture, they saw in 'dreams' and 'visions' a direct revelation ultimately from God as the source of their teaching. Careful study of scripture was too tedious; all one needed was a 'vision from God.' This was enough authority to teach these ideas.

Also, the Colossian false teaching opted for a strict 'self-help' approach to religion. All kinds of rules and regulations were imposed and taught as necessary for one to be pleasing to God: [Why do you submit to regulations, 21](#) "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"? (v. 20-21). Most of these rules came out of Judaism, and had their original foundation in the Holiness Code of the Law of Moses in the Old Testament. They focused on the purity rituals that were central to first century Judaism. Dietary regulations were required; an annual observance of a religious calendar was mandated (v. 16), among other requirements. These ideas found sympathy among the Gentiles at Colossae because in some of the Greco-Roman religions and philosophical traditions similar regulations were taught, and these folk had been raised with these teachings. Thus the Jewish and pagan heritages provided a background of teaching that gave seeming legitimacy and importance to these different ideas. Thus the approach of the false teachers at Colossae was, in Niebuhr's terms, accommodation of culture to Christ. The teachings of the gospel needed to be accommodated to the traditions of their culture in order to gain a better way of thinking.

The practices of the false teaching. The religious practices demanded by this false teaching focused on two or three areas: strict regulation of diet (v. 16, "[matters of food and drink](#)"); observance of a religious calendar (v. 16, "[observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths](#)"); and severe self discipline of one's body (v. 18, "[self-abasement](#)"; v. 23, "[severe treatment of the body](#)"). All of this was aimed at creating piety and humility by the follower (v. 23, "[promoting self-imposed piety, humility](#)"). The heart of this had to do with achieving sufficient purity in order to receive these supposed 'visions' from the invisible world of God: vv. 20-21, "[Why do you submit to regulations, 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'?](#)". In other words, what we gain from Jesus in faith commitment isn't enough. To it must be added all these requirements that by our own self effort can enable us to be pleasing to God.

Human nature is bent toward compulsion to have to 'do something' in order to reach God. In general the traits of these teachings at Colossae outlined by Paul here typify most false religious teaching of our world today. Christian cult groups virtually always have rigid rules and regulations that must be obeyed if one is to be acceptable to God. All of the non-Christian world religions work off the belief that self-effort at piety is at the heart of proper religious expression. Even Judaism with its religious legalism fall prey to much of the same line of thinking.

But inside orthodox Christianity this kind of thinking can be found in differing expressions. Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have their system of saints and angels that stand between the Christian and Christ. Most Protestants have great tendencies to gravitate toward religious legalism with sets of rules and regulations that must be followed in order to maintain one's standing before God. Baptists around the world have not be free from being victimized by the same kind of thinking that Paul condemned at Colossae.

II. Why is it bad?

What is wrong with a Christianity that imposes rules and regulations?

One of the [criticisms leveled against Paul's preaching of the gospel](#) of "salvation by grace through faith apart from works of law"² was that it would open the door to immoral living.³ This criticism came from both the synagogue Jews outside Christianity who opposed the preaching of the gospel, and from the Judaizers on the inside of the church who felt that strict observance to the Mosaic Law was essential to salvation as well.⁴ Much of Paul's thirty year plus ministry was spent fighting this criticism from both inside and outside Christianity.

But out of his own experience of Christ on the Damascus road (cf. Acts 9:1-31), he came to understand that [in Christ we find absolutely everything](#) that is needed to be gained acceptance from God. The rules and regulations dreamed up through human thinking are false and dangerous to authentic religious experience based on the apostolic gospel.

Thus repeatedly in Colossians he stresses the complete sufficiency of Christ for our religious needs.

²Cf. Eph. 2:8-10 (NRSV): "8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

³Cf. Rom. 6:1-2 where Paul responds to this criticism (NRSV): "1 What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?"

⁴Cf. Acts 15 (NRSV) for an early version of the insider Judaizing stance: "1 Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders."

Two foundations principles are set forth by Paul to the Colossians and to us:

VV. 6-7: “6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

Here he appeals to the Colossians to *continue living their Christian life within the framework of their conversion experience* and what they were first taught by Epaphras about the nature of the Christian religion. Their conversion centered on turning their life over to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in order to gain forgiveness and cleansing from their sinfulness. In Christ they experienced everything, absolutely everything, necessary to understand God and to be able to come before Him in acceptance. Note Paul’s words in vv. 9-15:

9 For in him [i.e., Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 12 when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, 14 erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

There is nothing to be known about God that isn’t already revealed in Christ. The Colossians needed no phoney visions, they needed no supplementary understanding in order to know God. When they came to Christ in conversion God made Himself known to them through Christ and nothing, absolutely nothing else, was needed.

Additionally in their conversion experience they came to *complete fullness in Christ*. Nothing else was needed or required. Christ who completely fills up their lives has total authority over everything in this world. And they possess Christ as was reflected in their baptismal experience. Their immersion under the water affirmed their death to self and their identification with the death of Christ on the cross. Their coming up out of the water proclaimed both the resurrection of Christ and God’s granting them new life in conversion. They were cleansed of their sin and set free from the guilt of their sinfulness. Thus they were made pure and acceptable to God. Now being expected to follow a set of rules and regulations for ritual purity in order to become pure before God makes no sense at all. Actually, it stands in contradiction to the cleansing of the believer based on the cross. It denies that Jesus’ death fully provides forgiveness and cleansing! No wonder Paul saw real dangers in this false teaching.

vv. 20-21: “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21 ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch?’”

One of the points that Paul especially stresses is that the believer’s death experience in conversion means a liberation from the powers of this world that dominate and influence human behavior. The false teachers called these powers ‘angels’ (v. 18), but Paul labels them the ‘stoicheia of this world’ (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) in vv. 8, 20. In Greek philosophy this phrase often referred to these invisible forces or spirits that stood between this visible world and the invisible world above it. In Gal. 4:9-11,⁵ Paul makes it clear what he means by this expression: these supposed ‘angels’ are actually the demons of the Devil operating in the space above the earth and below Heaven to control and destroy humans.⁶ For the Colossians to adopt this substitute religion would be nothing more than a return to worldliness and to resubmit themselves to the influence and control of the demonic. The old Devil is not dumb. He knows that Jesus defeated him on the cross, and that every time a person comes to faith in Christ he loses his control over that person’s life. Their spiritual death in conversion is actually a liberation from his enslavement of their life because Christ’s death broke his power over God’s creation, as verse 15 affirms: “[Christ] *disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.*” So the Devil’s tactic is to regain some influence over these people by convincing them that true religion is made up of a system of rules and regulations that have to be followed. Influencing believers to think they have to follow such rules gets them back under his influence so he can ultimately ruin their life.

Paul saw this false teaching for what it truly was, a tool of Satan to deceive and mess up the lives of people wanting to please God. Thus he used a series a negative labels to expose its falseness.

⁵Gal. 4:9-11 (NRSV): “9 Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? 10 You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. 11 I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.”

⁶Cf. Eph. 6:12 (NRSV): “12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

It had the ability to 'take people captivity' (v. 8, ὁ συλαγωγῶν), that is, enslaved them under the corrupting and disastrous influences. It was nothing more than 'empty deceit' (v. 8, κενῆς ἀπάτης). That is, this teaching replaced the truth with lies and contained no substance at all. The teaching was the useless ideas of human thinking (v. 8, "according to human tradition" [κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων]; v. 16, "a human way of thinking" [ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ]; v. 22, "simply human commands and teachings" [κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων]). Thus it led to people being "puffed up" (v. 18, "puffed up without cause" [εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος]). Religious legalism always leads to pride and arrogance, with a feeling of spiritual elitism. These people had 'visions'! They were in closer contact with the other world, and therefore had superior knowledge. Thus they prompted "self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body" (v. 23, ἐν ἐθελοθησικία καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνη [καὶ] ἀφειδία σώματος.). All of it stemmed from their claim to possessing a superior wisdom (v. 23, "an appearance of wisdom" [λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας]).

All this meant for Paul was that its origins lay in the demonic and not in Christ (v. 8, "according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" [κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν]). Those advocating and adopting this teaching at Colossae were tools in the hands of Satan, and had no connection to Christ. These people were not "holding fast to the head, [i.e., Christ] from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God" (v. 19, καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβασόμενον αὐξεῖ τὴν αὐξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ.).

Folks, what Paul said about the false teaching at Colossae still applies to similar false teaching today. Any brand of Christianity that takes its eyes off the complete sufficiency of the crucified and resurrected Christ to make sinful humanity acceptable to a holy God is false and a corruption of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. It will inevitably lead to religious legalism and will prompt spiritual arrogance. The shift moves from Christ to the individual accomplishments of the worshipper. This is phoney religion! It is a religion of the flesh that has departed from the Word of God.

CONCLUSION

Believers must ever be on guard to protect themselves against such corrupting influences. Peter's warning in 1 Peter 5:8 is always relevant: "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." And he comes to us not showing us his true colors. Instead, he comes to us through phoney preachers proclaiming a Substitute Religion over the TV and the radio, through pulpits across the land. He shows up in fancy clothes at seminar retreats promising to teach you how to find success in life. He speaks with high sounding words that play to your egotism and self conceit. Be awake! Be on guard! Don't fall prey to this nonsense!

I close with this question: What kind of religion do you have today? The real thing based on a crucified and resurrected Christ as the exclusive way to God? Or a Substitute Religion, based on your personal accomplishments to 'lift yourself up to God'? One way leads to Heaven; the other way to Hell. As Jesus declared (Matt. 7:21-23):

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' 23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'"