

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Rome's Counterfeit Authority – Part One" (Colossians 2:18-23, Matthew 16:13-19)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

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It is well said that much of the history of the Christian church is the history of the conflict between God's authentic authority and Satan's counterfeit authority. We find one of the first historic examples of this in the passage we are presently studying, in Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen.

In his letter to this early New Testament church, the Apostle Paul is issuing one of the very first warnings against the tyranny of man-made doctrines. Let me call your attention once again to these words of God the Holy Spirit that have been given to us through the Apostle Paul. If you are able, I hope that you will open your Bible with me to Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. Let us hear the Word of the Lord:

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

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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)

### **Review: Four Forms of the Counterfeit**

As I said a moment ago, what we have before us is a historic warning. The church at Colosse is only a few years old, and it is one of the very first Christian churches. And already this fledgling church is experiencing the threat of man-made doctrines. And so Paul is warning the church. And we find in these verses that his warning is very specific. Paul is warning these believers about a tyranny that comes into the church in four specific forms – all of them under the overall heading of man-made doctrines.

Number one, we find that those who bring in man-made doctrines always seek to place us under the bondage of counterfeit authority instead of the true liberty of God's authority.

Number two, we find that those who bring in man-made doctrines often seek to lead the church into the emptiness of counterfeit worship instead of the fullness that is to be found in the true worship of God.

Number three, we find that those who bring in man-made doctrines often direct the individual Christian, and the church as a body, to approach God through

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counterfeit intercessors instead of the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And, number four, we find that those who bring in man-made doctrines often seek to deceive us with counterfeit mysteries, counterfeit secrets, counterfeit hidden knowledge, things that are not the true knowledge of God and the true mysteries of God that we saw when we studied chapter one of this book.

### **Review: Our Method of Approach**

And so we are presently focusing upon the first of these forms of counterfeit, the foundational counterfeit if you will, which is counterfeit authority. This is the evil foundation of all man-made doctrines. We are approaching this evil counterfeit by looking at four specific things in the light of the passage before us.

First, we have considered the kinds of counterfeits that the Colossian church was confronting at the time Paul wrote this epistle to them. In our last message we saw that these counterfeit authorities were, in a very real sense, prototypes of all those that would follow in the long history of the Christian church.

Secondly, beginning today, we are going to examine some of the counterfeit authorities of the same kind that we find in the subsequent history of the church.

After this, thirdly, we are going to examine the kinds of counterfeit authorities that confront us, that confront the individual Christian and the church as a body in our own time.

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And fourthly and finally, we are going to bring our focus back away from all of these counterfeits to that which is real and legitimate and eternal – the authority of Jesus Christ who is the Word of God made flesh, the authority of Holy Scripture which is God's written Word, and the authority of God the Holy Spirit who is the Author of that written Word.

### **Beginning Today: Counterfeit Authority in Church History**

Now, if you study church history, you will find endless examples of this phenomenon of counterfeit authorities down through the centuries. Because of the limits of time we must confine ourselves to a few areas that dominate the landscape in that long history.

Of course, we find that the great counterfeit authority that dominates the long centuries of church history is the counterfeit authority of the Roman Catholic church. No single entity has accumulated and exercised more counterfeit authority for a longer span of time than the church of Rome. No visible church has propagated a greater body of man-made doctrines than the church of Rome.

But we also need to recognize that the Protestant church has not been immune to such things. In fact, we find counterfeit authorities springing up very early in the history of the Protestant Reformation. Some of these counterfeit authorities first appeared among what we might call the most Protestant of the Protestants, the Anabaptists, and those counterfeit authorities continue to exercise power and propagate man-made doctrines in some parts of the church, five hundred years later.

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So it is only right that we should look at both of these elements in church history – counterfeit authority in Roman Catholicism, and also counterfeit authority in Protestantism. In both cases we find men doing exactly what Paul warns against here in Colossians chapter two.

In both cases we find men setting themselves up as judges over the beliefs and behavior of others, and basing those judgments not on Holy Scripture, but on doctrines of their own invention that have no foundation in the Word of God. In both cases we find men seeking to cheat believers of their reward in Christ.

In both cases we find men putting on a front of false humility as they place upon themselves this cloak of counterfeit authority. But, Paul tells us, the fact is that these inventors and promoters of man-made doctrines are actually “vainly puffed up in their fleshly minds.”

In both cases, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, we find men operating in a realm which has only the appearance of wisdom. But in fact, Paul tells us, they are operating in the realm of the absolutely useless – things that are worthless for the true need of man in sin, and the true need of the believer in Christ. And because these things are worthless they are therefore exceedingly dangerous for the Christian and the church. They take our eyes off of that which is real and true – Christ and His Word.

And so we shall look at this danger as we find it both in the Roman Catholic church beginning in the third century A.D. and continuing to the present time, and

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also as we also find it in some parts of the Protestant church beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing to the present time.

### **Roman Catholicism's Counterfeit Authority**

So we begin with the counterfeit authority that props up Roman Catholicism. Let me now draw for you a summary picture of the development of counterfeit authority within the Roman Catholic church.

First of all, the Roman Catholic church establishes its doctrines by making man the primary authority. The Vatican teaches that the Roman Church itself is the infallible judge of truth, not God through His Word. The Church – the men of the church – constitute the final authority, they say, not Scripture.

In Roman Catholicism, Scripture has a secondary status at best. And so over the centuries, Rome has built a complex web of man-made traditions and arbitrary, changeable regulations that are in fact foreign to Scripture. And Rome says that Christians must obey all of these things in order to remain in good standing with the Church.

Let me give you some quotations from official Vatican publications. First, this one:

The Council of Trent [which met in the 1600s in response to the Protestant Reformation – the Council of Trent]...forbids that, in 'matters of faith and morals belonging to the building-up of Christian doctrine', [forbids that] the Bible [should] be explained against the sense held by

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the Church, or against the unanimous consent of the [church] Fathers....[T]he Scriptures [must] be explained according to the teaching of the Church.... [T]he rules have been laid down [by the church] which will ensure due conformity of Catholic exegesis [that is, Catholic interpretation of Scripture – which will ensure due conformity] with [official] Catholic...teaching... (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, entry on "Hermeneutics")

And here is another official Vatican statement:

As the Divinely appointed teacher of revealed truth, the [Roman Catholic] Church is infallible. (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, entry on "The Church")

Now, in sharp contrast to this, Biblical Christianity recognizes that the Bible is the sole and infallible authority. Authentic Biblical Christianity recognizes that the Bible give us the system of doctrine that is authoritative and unchanging. Authentic Christianity submits to the Bible's own teaching that Scripture *alone* can infallibly interpret Scripture.

Therefore, authentic Christianity judges every word of man by the standard of conformity to Scripture. In the very chapter we are studying, Colossians chapter two, Scripture warns against establishing or changing doctrine by interpreting Scripture according to human philosophy or tradition.

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In the book of Isaiah, the Lord condemned the false prophets of that day in ancient Israel. He said, "They have transgressed the laws, [they have] changed the ordinance" (Isaiah 24:5). And many centuries later, Roman Catholicism began doing exactly the same thing. And ever since, from the third century onward, they keep changing doctrine, they keep changing the rules.

Let me give you what is perhaps one of the most ridiculous examples, but it shows just how sad the bondage of counterfeit authority can be. For hundreds of years, the Vatican said that eating meat on a Friday (even a slice of bologna) was a mortal sin. The Vatican said that the person who ate so much as a slice of bologna on a Friday, and who died without confessing that alleged sin to a priest – the Vatican said that such a person would go straight to Hell.

But then in the 1960s, the Vatican changed the doctrine. And so now, Rome says that it's alright to eat meat on Fridays unless the church proclaims a specific meatless Friday. And even in that case, eating that slice of bologna on a Friday is no longer what the Vatican calls a mortal sin but only a venial sin.

You see, the Vatican has also decided that some sins deserve more punishment than other sins. And so now the Vatican says that the person who eats a slice of bologna on a meatless Friday is no longer in danger of going straight to Hell. No, he can cleanse that alleged sin, that sin which has not been confessed to a human priest, by spending time in Purgatory after he dies.



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Dear friends, such arbitrary, man-made doctrines, and the authority upon which such doctrines are founded – these things are absolutely foreign to the Word of God, and utterly contrary to the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. The doctrine of Purgatory in particular has absolutely no basis in Scripture.

Our Lord Jesus condemned such things with these words, in Mark chapter seven:

Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men...All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition...making the Word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. (Mark 7:6-13)

### **The Counterfeit Authority of the Papacy**

But Roman Catholicism clings to its complex web of man-made authorities and traditions. Roman Catholicism claims that only the College of Cardinals ruled by the Pope has authority in matters of faith and morals, and by that authority Rome reserves the right to change its doctrines over time. Let me read to you once again from official Roman Catholic statements:

Having established the general doctrine of the Church's infallibility, we naturally proceed to ask what are the organs through which the voice of

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infallible authority makes itself heard. We have already seen that it is only in the episcopal body which has succeeded to the college of Apostles that infallible authority resides [i.e., in the College of Cardinals], and that it is possible for the authority to be effectively exercised by this body [the College of Cardinals], dispersed throughout the world, but united in bonds of communion with Peter's successor [i.e., the Pope], who is its visible head and center. (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, entry on "Infallibility")

And then this:

Finally, it is objected that the acceptance of ecclesiastical infallibility is incompatible with the theory of [ongoing] doctrinal development which Catholics commonly admit [or embrace]. But...it is impossible to frame any theory of [ongoing doctrinal] development, consistent with Catholic principles, in which [human] authority is not recognized as a guiding and controlling factor. (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, entry on "Infallibility")

This, dear friends, is the Roman Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession. They say that the pope is the successor of Peter, and the cardinals of the church are the successors of the apostles, and therefore they exercise supreme authority. And, they say, this authority extends not only over the Roman Catholic church, but also over Protestants as well. Here is another Vatican statement:

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Apostolic succession is found [only] in the Catholic Church...none of the separated churches [i.e., the Protestants – none of them] have any valid claim to [authority].... In the third century the popes claim authority from the fact that they are St. Peter's successors, and no one objects to this claim, no one raises a counter-claim. No city boasts the tomb of the Apostle [Peter] but Rome. (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, entry on "Apostolic Succession")

### **Was Peter the “Rock” On Which Christ Built His Church?**

Now, what is the Bible's answer to this counterfeit authority? Was the Apostle Peter the first in a long line of popes? Was Peter the “rock” upon which Christ said He would build His church? Absolutely not.

The Bible declares clearly, unequivocally, that the church's authority is founded upon Jesus Christ alone. Scripture itself refutes Rome's claims of continuing apostolic authority.

Rome bases this claim of papal authority largely upon a very wrong interpretation of one passage in Matthew chapter sixteen. Let me read those verses for you, and I hope you will turn there if you are able. Matthew chapter sixteen, beginning at verse thirteen —

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they

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said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:13-19)

Now, the Vatican teaches that when Jesus said, "upon this rock," He meant Peter. Therefore, Rome says that Peter is the rock on which the true church of Christ is built. They claim that Peter was to receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven, giving him the authority to make binding decrees on earth. Rome therefore designates Peter as the first pope, the bishop of Rome, and the papacy as the chief authority in the church. Therefore, the Vatican says, anyone who does not submit to the Roman Church's authority opposes the one true representative of Christ on earth and his subordinates, and therefore that person opposes God.

But dear friends, the original language of this passage in Matthew makes it very clear that Rome's interpretation of these verses is absolutely wrong. It is impossible. The original Greek makes it clear that Peter is not the "rock" to whom

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Jesus referred. Christ refers to Peter's name (*petros*, a stone or small rock, a masculine noun), and Jesus says that "upon this rock" (*petra* – a different word – upon this foundation stone or mass of stone, a feminine noun) – “upon this *petra*” – not “upon this *petros*” – "I will build my church." Linguistically, the "rock" cannot be Peter himself. The “rock” is Peter’s testimony, Peter’s statement that "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

What Jesus is saying is this: Simon, you are *petros*, only a small, moveable rock; and on this *petra* — this massive, un-moveable rock, your accurate testimony that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God — on *this* I will build my church. Jesus is not saying, My church shall be built upon Peter. No. Jesus is saying, My church shall be built upon Me – the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Peter himself testifies to this fact in his first epistle. In First Peter chapter two, beginning at verse six, Peter says this:

Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him [Jesus Christ] will by no means be put to shame.” Therefore, to you who believe, He [Jesus] is precious; but to those who are disobedient [to those who refuse to believe that the church is founded on Christ and not on a mere man – for them], “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.” They stumble [Peter says], being disobedient to the Word... (1 Peter 2:6-8)

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Well dear friends, we have much more to consider on this subject, but we have reached the limit of our time for today. We have one more significant point to consider about the false authority of Roman Catholicism, and that is the Roman church's exercise of what is called the *anathema* – the Roman Catholic church's false claim of exclusive authority to condemn a soul to Hell. And so that is the point at which we shall continue, the Lord willing, in our next message.

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