

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Presbyterian Anarchy, Part 1" (Colossians 2:18-23, Ephesians 4:11-16)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

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If you are able to do so as you listen today, I hope you will turn in your Bible with me to the passage we are presently studying, Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. The Apostle Paul under divine inspiration writes these words, 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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## **The Nature of God's Warning**

Today we continue our examination of this warning of God the Holy Spirit against the evil of man-made doctrines. This is a warning against the tyranny that can ruin the spiritual life of the individual Christian, that can ruin the spiritual life of the church as a body, if we allow man-made doctrines to gain a foothold. We must not do it.

We find in this passage that the Apostle Paul warns us against four things specifically – four categories of counterfeits. He warns against submission to counterfeit authority. He warns against engaging in counterfeit worship. He warns against the use of counterfeit intercessors. And, he warns against the deception of counterfeit mysteries, or counterfeit revelation.

## **The Warning Against Counterfeit Authority**

At present we are focusing our attention on the issue of counterfeit authority in the church. "Let no man cheat you of your reward" in Christ, Paul says. We have seen that both the Jewish legalizers and the followers of pagan philosophy tried to do just that. They tried to impose their counterfeit authority on the church at Colosse, as they did in many of the early churches. And that, of course, is the primary reason why Paul writes these words to the church.

But the Bible is a timeless book, and the words that we have before us are words for all time, words for all situations, eternal words. This passage speaks

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against the evils of counterfeit authority that we find throughout the centuries of church history. It doesn't matter if that counterfeit authority is the vast hierarchy of Roman Catholicism, or if it is some illegitimate authority arising within the Protestant church. Both are evil in God's sight.

### **Counterfeit Authority In Our Time**

And as we have seen in our last two messages, the evil tyranny of counterfeit authority in the church continues to be a serious problem in our own time. Perhaps at no time in the history of the Evangelical church has it been more of a problem. In our last two messages, we saw that the Purpose-Driven Church movement and the Emergent Church movement are two of the most horrible examples of this in our own time. And because of the limits of time we were really only able to scratch the surface. But even to scratch the surface is to expose a stinking spiritual cancer.

The examples of counterfeit authority in the church today are endless. All you need to do is turn on the radio or the television and they will come in like a flood. We live in a time that can truly be called an age of spiritual anarchy within the visible church. The effects on the church are deadly. Many are being deceived and swept away by these things.

### **A Lesser-Known Development**

But today I want to call your attention to another problem of counterfeit authority in the church. This is a development that has gone on for quite a number

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of years. But it has received far less public exposure than many of the others. Even the vast majority of Bible-believing Christians are not aware of this particular development. But we need to be, because it is an evil that can spread like a cancer.

I am speaking of the evil exercise of counterfeit authority that has been taking place in nominally conservative Presbyterian churches, especially in the United States. As I said, this is a development that has received far less public exposure than some of the others. But it is deadly serious.

The leading result of this development is that damnable heresy has taken hold of the two leading nominally conservative Presbyterian denominations in the United States – the Presbyterian Church in America (the PCA), and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (the OPC).

What is this damnable heresy? The core of it is this: Men are being permitted to openly teach that human beings are saved from sin not by the blood of Jesus Christ alone, but by water baptism.

Men are being permitted to openly teach that a sinner is not justified in the sight of God by faith in Christ alone, but by a combination of faith in Christ plus his own works.

Men are being permitted to openly deny that Scripture teaches a great exchange – that our sins are placed on Christ, and that the robe of His perfect righteousness

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is placed on us when we believe. The men who are spreading these false teachings deny the second part of that exchange. They deny the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness to sinners. They deny that this is the basis on which we stand justified before God. And so they introduce water baptism and the works of the flesh in place of the righteousness of Christ.

### **Specific Examples of the Present Horror**

Some of you may think that this is impossible. Let me give you a brief overview of the facts.

In the year 2000, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America formally abandoned belief in the Genesis creation account. It adopted the position that widely divergent teachings on the nature and length of the days of creation in Genesis chapter one are all acceptable.

Dear friends, the Hebrew text of Genesis chapter one is very clear. The days of the creation account are literal days. But the PCA decided that it is acceptable to teach that the days are literal days, or perhaps some kind of ambiguous literary figure, or perhaps each of the days represents billions of years.

The PCA said that requiring conformity to what the original language of Scripture actually says - six literal days – to do that would be (and I am quoting now) "disturbing to the Church." In 2004 the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church adopted the same position on the doctrine of creation.

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In 2003, the PCA's General Assembly approved an amendment to the PCA *Book of Church Order* that permits each of the PCA's dozens of presbyteries to decide what constitutes the "fundamentals of the system of doctrine" when they examine the theological positions of men who come to be ordained to the ministry.

What has been the result of these developments? Less than ten years later, the PCA and the OPC both have men who are open theistic evolutionists, and men who openly deny essential doctrines of the faith.

In late 2011 and early 2012, three different presbyteries of the PCA found pastors who teach salvation by water baptism, and salvation by faith plus works, *not guilty* of teaching heresy.

These men, and many others in both the PCA and the OPC, all deny that Christ's righteousness is imputed to sinners in order for them to be saved. Instead, they say, a sinner must have a righteousness of his own.

These men all declare that the actual means of salvation is not the blood of Christ, but the water of baptism. Let me quote one of these men. He writes this – I'm quoting him now:

Baptized children [that is, baptized infants] are Christians. They are disciples. They belong to Jesus. They are members of his body, of his Church. They don't grow up and "become" Christians in high school or

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college when they have a particularly powerful experience of God's love or grace. They can and should have these experiences as they mature. But for baptized Christian children these experiences are not "conversion." Baptism seals to our children all the promises of God in Christ. They are forgiven, justified, adopted, etc. by means of their baptism into the church. [End of quote]

In 2003, the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church likewise acquitted a man who teaches these things, and he was not the first to be acquitted. The men who adjudicated that case went on record as saying that it is permissible within the OPC to teach that people are justified by their works at the Last Judgment, not by faith alone in Christ alone apart from works, as Scripture teaches.

### **Presbyterian Anarchy: How It Happened**

Dear friends, this is spiritual anarchy. This is heresy. This is apostasy. This is open denial of the very fundamentals of the Christian faith. These are teachings that lead souls to Hell. These reputedly conservative Presbyterian denominations, the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, are in the deepest kind of spiritual crisis imaginable.

And dear friends, if you doubt that any of these things are true, please contact us. I'll give our contact information at the end of the program. We can provide you with the documentation that these things are indeed true – horribly true.

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Now you may be asking, How did these things happen? The answer is the same as it has been in every case throughout church history. It all begins with counterfeit authority. It all begins with a departure from the sole authority of Scripture. Once a church begins to get out from under the sole authority of Scripture, it can rationalize and justify any and all departures from the truth.

Like a cancer in the human body, the problem may begin undetected. But sooner or later the cancer will begin to destroy the life of the body. First it destroys only one cell at a time. But eventually the cancer will debilitate and destroy entire organs of the human body. And it is the same in the church. If it is not rooted out and removed, a heresy that begins in a single seminary classroom or a single pulpit can eventually spread to destroy an entire denomination.

That is what has happened in the PCA and the OPC in our time. And the root of the problem is the exercise of counterfeit authority within the church.

### **Biblical Authority: Not a Matter of Labels or Affiliations**

Now as I have said many times, the best way to recognize a counterfeit is to thoroughly understand the genuine article. And that certainly applies to the issue of authority within the true Church of Jesus Christ.

Now please listen carefully to what I am about to say. It does not matter what name or label a local visible assembly of the church may wear. It is not my purpose in this message to argue for or against wearing the label of Presbyterian,

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or Baptist, or Evangelical Methodist, or Bible church, or any other identity. It is not my purpose in this message to argue for or against being an independent church or being part of a denomination or association – as long as that denomination or association remains true to the faith.

The point is that no matter what label a local church may wear, or what affiliations it may chose to have or not have, there is one Biblical model of legitimate authority within the church.

In order to understand how counterfeit authority has taken hold of the PCA and the OPC, we must clearly understand that which God says is right when it comes to this issue of legitimate and illegitimate authority. And so let me point you to Scripture.

### **Ephesians 4: Christ's Gifted Men**

First of all, if you are able to do so, please turn with me to Ephesians chapter four. Ephesians chapter four. In this chapter we find that Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the Church, has given particular gifts to men of His choosing, men under His authority, for specific purposes.

We find, Ephesians chapter four, verse eleven, that Christ "gave some to be apostles" – and this speaks of the twelve, and of Paul. The office of apostle was a special and unique one. It was the authority to receive and to declare new revelations from God. That authority ceased with those first apostles. We have the complete body of Scripture, God's full revelation to us, in our hands today.

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We find in Ephesians chapter four, verse eleven that Christ also gave “some [to be] prophets” – and in the original language this is not a reference to those who prophesy future events, but to those who are gifted to be expositors of Scripture.

We also find in this verse that Christ gave “some [to be] evangelists” – men who are especially gifted to proclaim the Gospel message to the lost, and in the original language the word would encompass those who are engaged in the work of missionary enterprise throughout the world.

And finally, in Ephesians chapter four, verse eleven we also find that Christ gave “some [to be] pastors and teachers” – and the grammatical construction in the original Greek indicates that this is a single office, that of the pastor-teacher. In other words, no man is gifted by Christ to be the pastor of a church, the under-shepherd of the flock of God, unless he is also gifted by Christ to be a teacher, an expositor of Scripture.

And so this is the beginning or the origin of legitimate authority within the church. The key characteristics are these: Number one, it is authority given by Christ Himself to men of His choosing. Number two, it is authority rooted in the Word of God. It is teaching authority. It is proclamation authority. It is ministry authority – the authority to speak as the representative and the ambassador of Christ, according to Scripture.

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## **The Twofold Purpose of Biblical Authority**

And what are the purposes of this authority? Paul tells us here in Ephesians chapter four. Notice verse twelve. Paul tells us that the reason Christ has given gifted men to His church is, verse twelve,

for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:12-16)

Here we see both the positive and negative nature of this authority. Positively, men who are called and gifted by Christ for the ministry of the Word, and teaching under His authority, are meant to be His means of building up the saints in the unity of the faith, in true knowledge of Christ.

And once again, as we found previously in Colossians chapter one, the Greek word for knowledge here is *epignosis*. Let me remind you that this word means

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not mere general knowledge, not spurious knowledge, not knowledge that is based on any authority that comes to hand, whether it is legitimate or not. No, this word in the original speaks of precise knowledge, correct knowledge, knowledge that is correct and precise because it is rooted and grounded in Christ and in His Word alone.

The goal of such authoritative teaching, the goal of the impartation of such precise and correct knowledge, as Paul says here in Ephesians, is the spiritual growth of the body of Christ. The building up of the people of Christ in the truth of Christ so that they might be truly conformed to Christ – as Paul puts it so vividly here, that we might measure up to the stature of the fullness of Christ.

That is the positive reason for all authority in the church. But Paul also gives us the negative reason. Men who are called and gifted by Christ for the ministry of the Word, and teaching under His authority, are meant to be the church's front line of defense against error.

Notice again the words Paul uses here. He makes it clear that error is rooted in counterfeit authority – verse fourteen:

that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ.

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When do these things come into the church? When do the members of the visible church act as untrained children, spiritually? When is the church tossed about like a ship without an anchor? When is the church prone to follow after every doctrinal deviancy that comes down the pike? It is when men are permitted to exercise counterfeit authority within the church. Paul calls it what it is: "the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting."

### **Our Next Broadcast – Part Two**

That, dear friends, is precisely what we find happening in the nominally conservative Presbyterian churches, in the PCA and the OPC, in our day. Heresy entering the church because of trickery, craftiness, deceitful plotting.

Now I realize that what I have just said is a very serious charge. But we shall see as we go along that it is true. But in order to understand that the men of the PCA and the OPC are guilty as charged, we need to understand three other things about Christ's ordained authority within the church.

And so in our next broadcast, the Lord willing, we are going to take up those points, and we shall see how nominally conservative Presbyterians today have failed to uphold Christ's authority, and have substituted illegitimate authority of their own, with disastrous results.

Friends, I know that these are not pleasant things to consider. But we must consider them. We must be aware of them. As Jude puts it in his epistle, we must

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recognize when ungodly men have crept into the church unnoticed, and have perverted the grace of God.

### **About the Broadcast**

*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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