

One of the challenges that every generation of Christians face is syncretism. Syncretism is the combining of different religions, cultures, or ideas.¹ It happens all the time when people of different cultures mix and blend their beliefs and values over time.

One art form in which syncretism frequently takes place is music, when musicians combine different musical styles. One of my favourite albums at the moment is Beethoven Blues by Jon Batiste, which as the title suggests is a combination of Beethoven and the Blues.

Today, for something different, I'd like to play a piece many of you will know titled Für Elise.²

While musical syncretism can produce something beautiful, it can also create disasters. The famous jazz trumpet player Miles Davis released his album, *On the Corner* in 1972. It was a fusion album of rock, funk, and jazz; Davis was trying to appeal to a young Black audience, but at the time it was savaged by critics, and derided as an “affront to taste,” and an “insult to listeners.”³ *On the Corner* was Davis's worst selling album.

Fifty years on, however, critics have reevaluated *On the Corner* with some calling it an “essential masterpiece.”⁴

Yet, while musical syncretism can be great or terrible, within Christianity syncretism is always a bad idea, because anything that dilutes or changes the work or Person of Jesus Christ is always a bad idea.

Last week we read how Paul addressed some of the false teaching being taught in the Colossian church – the false idea that Jesus was lesser than God and was therefore an insufficient Saviour. Paul sought to correct these false ideas by arguing that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” and the creator of “all things in heaven and on earth.” Plus, He is the “firstborn from the dead” – that is, Jesus is what we will become, albeit not divine. In Christ God was “pleased to reconcile to himself all things.” Jesus is the all-sufficient Creator and Saviour. What I did not say last week – and should have – is that only God can forgive us, only God can save us. A mere created being, no matter how great, cannot do what only God can do. Thus, unless Jesus was God, He could not save us.

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/syncretism>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5YRhvH6Uys>

³ <https://www.openculture.com/2025/04/miles-davis-album-on-the-corner-tried-to-woo-young-fans-of-rock.html>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Corner

Today Paul tackles the consequences of such teaching: if the work of Christ on the Cross was not sufficient to save them, then the Colossians would have to add to Christ's work: they would have to do something more to be saved.

And, as I've mentioned previously, these additions included abstaining for certain foods, observing certain festivals and Sabbaths, treating their bodies harshly, and worshipping angels.⁵

Pauls addresses these concerns head-on in verse 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.

The phrase "see to it that no one" is a phrase Paul uses several times when he is wanting to warn his readers that they're facing danger.⁶ The danger here is that they will be taken "captive through philosophy and empty deceit" – another way to phrase this would be "through empty and deceitful philosophy."⁷

The Greek word translated "take you captive" sounds very similar to the word for *synagogue*, leading some scholars to believe Paul was using a play-on-words, suggesting that this false teaching was Jewish in nature,⁸ which is possible given the focus on food and Sabbath keeping.

The word philosophy means to love knowledge or wisdom, philosophical traditions or teachings, even religions.⁹ Paul, however, is probably not condemning philosophy in general, nor the modern discipline of philosophy, (except when it is based on a worldview that seeks to explain the world without God). What Paul is opposing is "empty and deceitful philosophy" or anything that sets itself up against Christ.

Any additions (or subtractions) from the pure message about Jesus would only cause the Colossians to be taken "captive" – imprisoning them in false teaching, when Jesus offered them freedom and life. Over and above all philosophy is Jesus, in Whom are "hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."¹⁰

The Colossians did not need to add anything more to their faith, because when they came to Christ they came to the One:

⁵ Colossians 2:16–17

⁶ David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 158

⁷ *Ibid.*, 159

⁸ Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 75

⁹ *Ibid.*, 159

¹⁰ Colossians 2:3

“in [Whom] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and [they came] to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.”¹¹

As I’ve stated already, Jesus is the Creator and Saviour, and when the Colossians believed in Christ, they came to the One who made them complete – they came “to fullness in him.” The fullness Paul is speaking of here is salvation. The Colossians can be assured that belief in Jesus alone is enough for salvation – they need not (they cannot) add anything to His work.¹²

Paul then provides a detailed (somewhat Jewish) description of what Christ has for the Colossians.

Firstly, in Christ they have been circumcised with a spiritual circumcision.¹³ In context, Paul is probably not referring to Jesus’ circumcision as a child, but rather metaphorically to Jesus’ death, when Jesus sacrificed his whole body on the Cross.¹⁴

Since Christ has done this for them, they need not undergo physical circumcision, and any external treatment of the body will add nothing to what Christ has already done.

Secondly, in Christ they have also been “buried with him in baptism.” One of the symbolisms of baptism, seen graphically when someone is baptised through full immersion, is the going down into the water as symbolic of dying with Christ and being buried with Him. Then, the coming up out of the water is symbolic of being raised to new life with Christ.

The Colossian’s have been baptised, and so they have been buried with Christ, and they have been raised with him through faith in the power of God.

This adds to Paul’s first point, since the Colossians have spiritually died and been raised with Christ, what more could they add Christ’s work of salvation?

Thirdly, when God raised them to life, he forgave all their trespasses, all their violations of the Law of God, “erasing the record that stood against us ... He set this aside, nailing it to the Cross.”¹⁵ The Colossians are now forgiven, entirely and completely. The record of their sins has been nailed to the Cross, and Christ has paid the penalty of death for them.

So, again, with their sins forgiven, once and for all, the Colossians need to nothing to earn God’s forgiveness or approval.

¹¹ Colossians 2:9–10

¹² David W. Pao, Colossians and Philemon, 163

¹³ Colossians 2:11

¹⁴ David W. Pao, Colossians and Philemon, 166

¹⁵ Colossians 2:13–14

Finally, in His death and resurrection, Jesus has

‘disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.’ (15)

The rulers and authorities that Christ disarmed are the demonic spiritual powers at work in the world. Jesus’ death and resurrection disarmed them, that is, He stripped them of their power and triumphed over them.

In writing these things Paul is again reinforcing Jesus’ supremacy over all things... “whether thrones or dominions or rules or powers.”¹⁶ Jesus, therefore, is the only One worthy of worship; they need not worship other spirits or angels.

Then to make all this crystal-clear Paul concludes by saying,

“Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths ... Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels...”¹⁷

Paul’s intention in these verses is to combat any teaching or practice that undermines the central conviction that Jesus is Lord.¹⁸ Any philosophy that claims a greater knowledge than Christ – especially any teacher that claims to have “secret knowledge” – is to be voided.

Throughout history many have claimed to have “secret knowledge” about the spiritual world. Today, many gurus – and even some Christians – claim to have such knowledge (I’m particularly wary of any Christian teacher who claims to have “insights”). But anyone who teaches anything more or less than Christ crucified and raised from the death, and that salvation is a completely free gift of God through God’s grace, and by simple faith in Jesus – well, Paul says “let that one be accursed.”¹⁹

All teachings that veer away from the pure gospel of Jesus inevitably lead to captivity of some kind, whether that is captivity to ways or thinking or behaviour. The false teachers in Colossae taught that the believers had to adhere to strict dietary rules, or observe certain days like Sabbaths, or treat their bodies harshly.

In the early centuries of the church several groups arose who believed that harsh treatment of the body was necessary for holy living. These groups were known as ascetics. One story is told of Elpidius, a hermit from Cappadocia who dwelt in a

¹⁶ Colossians 1:16

¹⁷ Colossians 2:16–18

¹⁸ David W. Pao, Colossians and Philemon, 174

¹⁹ Galatians 1:9

mountaintop cave outside of Jericho for 25 years until his death, eating only on Saturdays and Sundays and standing up worshipping throughout the night.

In 423 AD Simeon Stylites the Elder climbed a pillar in Syria and remained there until his death 36 years later. How he ate, slept, or did his ablutions I'm not sure.

One thing I am sure of, is that Paul would likely have spoken against such behaviour. Following Christ does not require such harsh treatment of the body, in fact, Paul will later say in Colossians

*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.*²⁰

Paul is also combatting idol worship. The Colossians were being encouraged to worship angels, but such worship was idolatry. Idolatry involves elevating created things to the level of the Creator; but this distorts the image of the Creator as the only One deserving of worship. Such worship also denies the power and sufficiency of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Only God is worthy of our worship, and sadly, if we worship other things we probably have a poor understanding of God.²¹

For us here today, it might seem as though Paul has little to say to us, but if you are at all tempted to think that you have to do anything in order to please God, or somehow add to what Jesus has done that God might accept you – the good news is that God loves you and in Christ God has done everything on our behalf. All we need do is have faith in Christ, and trust in God's goodness and love. Don't worship anything else, just love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and might – and love your neighbour as yourself, (albeit even this is by the grace of God and strength of the Holy Spirit), and you will have done all that God requires.

²⁰ Colossians 2:23

²¹ David W. Pao, Colossians and Philemon, 175-176