

# Cafeteria Religion

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Colossians 2:6-23

**Sermon Series:**  
**Journey of Transformation**

*Americans are becoming a nation of religious drifters.*

Cafeteria religion, the title of today's sermon, is not a religion that worships in cafeterias. Nor is it a religion that worships cafeterias. Cafeteria religion aptly describes the age in which we live. We are choosing religion much as we select food items from an a la carte cafeteria line.

Mr. Potato Head is a toy that has been around since 1951. It has the distinction of being the first toy advertised on television and originally sold for 98 cents. Mr. Potato Head consists of a plastic potato and a variety of parts to make a face. Just as there are any number of ways to build a potato head, there are innumerable ways for people to construct their own religion.

Let me argue the point with a more contemporary illustration. Build-a-Bear Workshops have only been in operation since 1997, yet this company is taking shopping malls by storm. It's hugely popular among children, teenage girls and a surprising number of adults. It offers you the opportunity to create your own personalized teddy bear. Americans increasingly ascribe to a Build-A-God approach to religion. We are mixing and matching religions like never before. I'll take a steady diet of modern culture, a side order of

Christianity and season it with a little Eastern religion and astrology.

According to the *Pew Forum*, Americans are becoming a nation of religious drifters. We still identify ourselves as Christians, but nearly a quarter of us now entertain Eastern or New Age beliefs. Twenty-three percent of self-identified Christians practice astrology, 22 percent believe in reincarnation, 21 percent believe in the spiritual energy of trees or crystals and a whopping 29 percent claim to be in touch with the dead.

Stephen Prothero, professor at Boston University, writes that Christian denominations used to vigorously debate over how and when to baptize Christians or just how much Jesus was present in the Lord's Supper. These debates are so last century! Today, the fault lines between religions are beginning to blur, in no small measure, because Americans have little idea of what these traditions actually stand for.

A recent article in *Newsweek* magazine, entitled "We are all Hindus Now," makes the same point. Hindus profess many paths to God. Hinduism represents one way to God, Mohammed another and Jesus still another way. Sixty-five percent of Christians in America believe that many religions can lead to God. I read recently of an Episcopal priest who turned Muslim. She

***...Jesus Christ  
is in a class all  
by himself.***

supplied the rationalization, “I’m following Jesus, and he led me to Islam.” Really?

Syncretism is the word that comes to mind to describe today’s cafeteria approach to religion. You won’t find this word in your Bible, but its equivalents are found everywhere in Scripture. The Old Testament is replete with prohibitions against mixing the worship of Yahweh with other religions and cultural influences. Paul writes in Colossians that the church is being infiltrated with people trying to mix Christ in a blender with other religions and cultural influences. Biblical scholars call this concoction “the Colossian heresy.” There are hints of this heresy in verse 8 when Paul warns his readers, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit.” These words, coupled with Paul’s admonition in verse 4 to watch out for people who try to “deceive you with plausible arguments,” ought to tip us off that people are peddling a cafeteria approach to the Christian gospel.

Let’s see what we can learn about this so-called Colossian heresy (the word heresy shocks the sensibilities of our modern ears). This heresy involves a legalism of some kind, which explains the reference to circumcision in verse 11 and food laws in verse 16 that judge people by what they eat and drink. The reference to observing “festivals, new moon celebrations and Sabbath days” in verse 16 suggests an astral cult that uses astrology in worship. In verse 18,

we learn of their worship of angels. The prohibitions mentioned in verse 23, “Do not handle, do not taste and do not touch” also evidences a form of legalism. They practice a form of rigid asceticism as expressed in the words, “the severe treatment of the body” from verse 23.

This heresy is likely an early form of Gnosticism. In many ways, Gnosticism stands behind every letter of Paul in the New Testament. Gnosticism originates from the Greek word for knowledge. Gnostics like to think of themselves as having access to a higher form of knowledge. They pride themselves for being people “in the know.” That’s why Paul makes repeated use of mystery in relationship to Christ at the end of chapter 1 (26-27) and the beginning of chapter 2 (2:2). The mystery of God is made known in Jesus Christ.

Gnostics believed people to be divine souls trapped in evil bodies. That’s why the Gnostics had such a hard time with God inhabiting Jesus’ body. In large measure, the Apostles’ Creed is formulated to challenge this heresy. Because the soul is good and the body evil, Gnostics treated the body harshly and would explain their severe treatment of the body in verse 23.

The argument Paul is making in Colossians 2 is the same put forward in Colossians 1—namely that Jesus Christ is in a class all by himself. Paul writes in verse 9, “For in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” which is taken verbatim from what he writes in the Christ hymn in 1:19. When Paul says in verse 10 that Christ is “the head of

***“Be a sinner  
and sin  
boldly.”***

- Martin Luther

every power and authority,” he mirrors what is written in 1:16-18, that Christ is superior to every cosmic being on Earth and in heaven, whether thrones, powers, rulers or authorities.

In other words, don’t waste your time fawning after angels, crystals, celebrities, rock stars, Punxsutawney Phil (a lot of help he’s been lately!). In God’s Big Story of creation, fall and redemption, Jesus Christ is God’s Redeemer. Remember God’s Big Story. We are created to live in relationship with God. We fall out of relationship with God through something called sin. But God, in the person of Jesus Christ, is uniquely capable of redeeming our life.

Legalism is any attempt to earn God’s favor by keeping our own code of conduct. We in the church are particularly susceptible to legalism. I can begin to think that my efforts at keeping God’s commandments will earn me favor with God. Any attempt to become moral by our own efforts alone is a form of legalism.

I’ve been reading a biography of Martin Luther in preparation for our Reformation tour this summer. Luther tried desperately to win favor with God with his own acts of righteousness. That’s principally why he became a monk. Luther once wrote, “If ever pious monk could have gotten to heaven through his monkery, it would have been me.”

Luther’s well-known quote often confuses people: “Be a sinner and sin boldly.” Some

actually thought Luther gave people a license to sin with these words. But consider his writing in the context of a letter Luther sends to his friend Philip Melancthon in 1521: “God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice even more boldly for Christ is victorious over sin, death and the world.”

Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of Luther’s words is instructive here. Admit your sin boldly. Don’t try to flee from it. Face the truth. We are not sin-free and, in ourselves, we never will be. Sin boldly, but believe in Christ more boldly still.

In verse 6, Paul writes about “receiving Jesus Christ as Lord.” The central affirmation of the Christian life is professing Jesus Christ as Lord. We are not sovereign, Jesus Christ is Lord.

Some people don’t like the thought of giving up control of their lives to anyone else, not even God. One of the things so frustrating about the recent snow storms is that we couldn’t be in control. We couldn’t go where we wanted when we wanted.

I like to be in control, don’t you? Yet, come to find out that we’re not really in control after all. Forty-five inches of snow will do that to you!

On the wall of every room in this church is a thermostat. I’m convinced these thermostats have been placed in our classrooms simply to amuse us. I press the menu button calling for more heat or air conditioning and it gives me a feeling of being in control. Yet nothing happens. Maybe the

***“You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”***

-George MacDonald

thermostats are there just to humor us, you know, to give us the illusion of being in control.

You and I are not really in control. So why don't we give up the illusion of control and entrust our lives to One who really knows how life is to be lived.

Paul writes in verse 6, “As you have received Christ as Lord, so live in him.” Receiving Christ as Lord is not the end game, it's only the beginning of God's work in our lives. That's why Paul portrays the Christian life as being rooted and built up in Christ (2:7). Be rooted in him as a tree sinks its roots deep into the soil. Be built up in Christ as one would construct or remodel a home.

George MacDonald illustrates well what I am trying to say. It's one of my all-time favorite metaphors of Christ's work of transformation and redemption:

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks on the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently, he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and doesn't seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were

going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

