

The Antiquity of Pagan Christianity

Some “Christian” groups have features that are not attested in the New Testament, such as prayers to the Mother of God and to deceased saints, professional priests who offer sacrifice, purgatory, sacramental actions that make a person a member of the community, an obligation on members to contribute financially to the organization, and ornate meeting places adorned with images. They justify such features on the basis of their antiquity. We need to understand two things about this state of affairs.

First, these features are indeed ancient. They all go back, not just to the church fathers, but to the oriental Mystery Religions (such as the cults of Demeter and Persephone, Mithra, Orpheus, Cybele, Isis, Serapis, Attis, and others) that were already part of Roman culture in the third and second centuries BC.

Second, the NT warns against confusing these cults with the true faith. Many of their features anticipate Christianity (e.g., the need for salvation from sin and the promise of eternal life). But the NT commands believers to separate from them.

The earliest warnings are to the Corinthians.

Some of the believers are participating in sacrificial meals in a cult’s temple:

1 Cor 8:10 For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol’s temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; 11 And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. 13 Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend. ... 10:19 What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing? 20 But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. 21 Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup

of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord’s table, and of the table of devils.

Paul repeats the warning in his second epistle:

2 Cor 6:14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? 15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? 16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye [the church] are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 17 Wherefore **come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing**; and I will receive you, 18 And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. 17:1 Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

When Paul visits Ephesus, others envy his spiritual power:

Acts 19:11 And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: 12 So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them. 13 Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. 14 And there were seven sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so.

Sceva was not the high priest of Israel, who would be in Jerusalem. He was probably a senior priest in one of the mystery cults. He tries to merge Christianity with his mixture of paganism and Judaism, but fails:

Acts 19:15 And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? 16 And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame

them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

His failure to blend Christianity with paganism has a profound effect on many of the converts.

Acts 19:17 And this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. 18 And many that [had] believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. 19 Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.

The word “believed” in v. 18 is in the perfect tense: they *had believed* in the Lord Jesus, prior to the events described here. Yet, as believers, they continue to cling to their pagan practices until the Spirit shows them, by the example of Sceva’s sons, the wickedness of this practice.

John writes the Revelation while exiled on Patmos, persecuted by Rome. One of his visions refers to Rome’s opposition to the faith:

Rev 17:1 And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: ... 5 And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. 6 And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: ... 7 And the angel said unto me, Wherefore didst thou marvel? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, ... 9 And here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth.

A woman, identified as “Babylon,” has three features: she is a harlot, she has martyred many Christians, and she sits on seven hills. All three point to the Roman empire. Harlotry throughout the Bible describes not only physical impurity but also spiritual unfaithfulness, the worship of false gods instead of the one true God, and Rome

opened its arms eagerly to the deity of the month. John’s presence on Patmos reflects her opposition to believers, and the seven hills are Rome’s trademark. This description in Revelation 17 leads to an exhortation in Revelation 18.

Rev 18:1 And after these things I saw another angel come down from heaven, ... 2 And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. 3 For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies. 4 And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, **Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins**, and that ye receive not of her plagues. 5 For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities.

Again we hear of her fornication, reflected in her willingness to merge elements of the mystery cults with her historic civic paganism. But in v. 4 we also hear an echo of Paul’s command in 2 Cor 6:17, “Come out.” As in Corinth and Ephesus, some of God’s people have accepted elements of the pagan practices common in Roman society. They must forsake these elements.

The non-biblical practices that characterize some groups are indeed ancient, but their antiquity does not recommend them to us. These practices antedate the coming of Christ. They reflect the mixture of pagan practices that were already well established in Roman society by the first century, and some people who were drawn to the gospel continued to cling to these practices. Far from endorsing this merger, the New Testament writers condemn it, and command us to come out from groups that perpetuate these errors:

Come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing (2 Cor 6:17).

Come out of her, my people (Rev 18:4).