

August 20, 2006 by Steve Brandon



Spiritual Peer Pressure (part 2)

Colossians 2:18-19

1. False Piety (verse 18a)
2. Feeble Hope (verse 18b)
3. Vain Pride (verse 18c)
4. Empty Faith (verse 19)

In my message last week, I mentioned to you of this phenomenon, which we call peer pressure. That is, the pressure to conform your behavior to satisfy the requirements of others, often so as to be a part of the group. It's a pressure that comes upon all of us, young and old alike. It comes in various different ways and through various means. But, fundamentally, it comes when others want us to be a part of their group. There are often threats that you will be left out of the group if you don't conform your actions to others. There are often hurtful words that seek to manipulate the feelings of our hearts, so that we might conform to the desires and demands of others. Peer pressure works, because nobody likes to be left out of the group. Nobody likes to hear others speak down of them. Nobody likes to feel as if they are missing out.

Those who apply the peer pressure upon others will use various means to persuade them. They will talk of the benefits of being a part of the in crowd. Benefits, such as the fun and enjoyment of the action suggested will be put forth. They will talk of the good results at the end. Any stand against their pressure will be questioned, suggesting that such a stand isn't wise. Authority will be questioned. Appeals will be addressed to the emotions. On and on the pressure will be applied in various ways and through various means.

This isn't a new phenomenon. It has been going on since the beginning of time. This is what Satan did in the garden with Eve. As the were both looking at the fruit in the garden, Satan said, "[If you eat of this fruit], you surely will not die! For God knows that in the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5-6). In other words, "Eve, God shouldn't be telling you what to do. His words aren't to be trusted. You are foolish to stay away from this fruit. Think of the benefit of eating. You will know good and evil and be just like God. You can be a part of His little group. C'mon, join us! Eat the fruit!"

When Solomon was teaching his son about peer pressure, he imagined what others might tell his son. He imagined that they might say, "Come with us. Let us lie in wait for blood. Let us ambush the innocent without cause. Let us swallow them alive like Sheol, even whole, as those who go down to the pit. We will find all kinds of precious wealth. We will fill our houses with spoil. Throw in your lot with us. We shall have one purse" (Prov. 1:11-14). In other words, "The benefits are high! You will be happy! You will be rich! It will be fun! C'mon, join our group!"

In the end, peer pressure often leads others to do things that they later regret. The promises are often empty promises. Do you think that Eve had any regret over what she did? I think of the deceitful promises of a little fun with some alcohol. But, I have seen many through the years regret the choices they have made, Especially in my college years. I saw many who "enjoyed themselves at the party last night," later pay the price with dry heaves that evening, and a headache in the next morning, and poorer grades in school.

I saw a great illustration of this last week. This past Thursday, I was given a pair of ticket to see the Milwaukee Brewers play the Houston Astros. I took my son to the baseball game. It was a good opportunity to have some father-son bonding time. We had a great conversation on the way up and back from the game. We enjoyed the game itself. One of the things that we saw was a girl, who was in her late teens (or early twenties). She had been drinking too much alcohol and was obviously drunk. She was boisterous. She was seemingly having a good time. But, she was making a fool of herself. She could barely walk down the stairs where we were all seated. I feared that she would fall and hurt herself. She was a pain in the neck to her friends, who had to care for her, helping her in and out of her seat on a number of occasions. It was a great opportunity for me to talk with my son about the folly of drunkenness. As is often the case, though great promise of fun was given, in the end, the results were terrible.

I think of the promise of sexual activity outside of marriage. Countless teens and young people have been pressured into improper sexual relationships. Often, the promise comes of happiness and belonging and joy and fulfillment. And yet, later on comes the great disappointment when reality sets in of the purity that was violated. Often, there is great guilt and feeling of condemnation as well. Later comes the regret in marriage, when the uniqueness of the marriage bed has been defiled. Peer pressure will often come with the promises of joy and fulfillment, but it will often end in disaster.

What is true in the physical realm is also true in the spiritual realm. Religious activity that has "the appearance of wisdom" actually ends in tragedy, when the pressured soul discovers the truth of their ways, often too late. In Colossae, peer pressure was taking place in the spiritual realm in the church that that had been planted by Epaphras. There were certain ones who were seeking to persuade those in Colossae, who were standing firm upon the sufficiency of Christ, to follow after other religious or spiritual practices. These Colossian believers were being promised great results: intimacy with God, fullness of spirituality, complete experience of religion. As those precious believers in Colossae stood firm upon Christ, they were being ridiculed for their beliefs and practices. They were being told that they were missing the prize. They were being told that they weren't experiencing the fullness of Christian life. And nobody likes to be left out of the group. The apostle Paul tells

these saints in Colossae not to let others tell you of all of the spiritual experiences that you are missing out upon, because you are clinging to Christ alone.

My message this morning is entitled, "Spiritual Peer Pressure (part 2)." My message might easily be entitled, "Don't be defrauded." This is the main command of verses 18-19, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize." It might easily be translated, "Let no one wrong you by an unjust decision" or "Let no one cheat you" or "Let no one rob you of a prize" or (as the New American Standard translates it), "Let no one defraud you."

The picture here comes from the world of athletics. Imagine yourself playing baseball. You hit it deep to short and begin running down to first base. In the meantime, the shortstop has fielded the grounder and makes a bad throw to the first baseman and pulls him off the bag, and you are safe at first base. But, the umpire calls you out! You earned first base. You deserved first base. The first baseman was pulled off the bag. But, you were *defrauded* of your prize, because of the umpire's call.

Paul's message here was the same: don't let others call you out at first base! You are safe in the arms of Jesus. As people come and seek to persuade you away from Him by placing undo emphasis upon false religious practices, don't follow after them! Keep the course of your faith! "Let no one defraud you of your prize," because you are safe in Jesus alone! Let no one cast a judgment upon you by degrading you because of the choices that you have made to rest in Jesus. I don't care how fantastic their religious experience and activity may appear to be, if it pulls you away from faith in Christ Jesus alone, their religious activity is vanity. Let's read our text:

Colossians 2:18-19

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by *delighting* in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, *taking his stand* on visions he has seen, [being] *inflated* without cause by his fleshly mind, and *not holding fast* to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

By way of outline this morning, I want to point out four ways in which you can be defrauded of Christ. I am getting each of these points from the four participles in our passage (which are displayed in italics above). This first way to be defrauded is by having a ...

1. False Piety (verse 18a)

This comes from verse 18, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize, by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels." The imposters were coming into Colossae and finding their joy and in those things that cannot save you.

There were two areas of their error. The first is identified here as "self-abasement." Your translation may say "asceticism" (ESV) or "false humility" (NIV, NKJV). Literally, in the Greek text, this is "humility." Everywhere else in the New Testament, this word is properly translated, "humility," except for here (as well as in verse 23 as well). It's describing a "lowly mind." It's describing a "lowly spirit," which is exactly the attitude to which we are called. "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves" (Phi. 2:3). However, the context here in Colossians shows us that there is a different humility that's being talked about here. It isn't the humility upon which God looks with delight (Isaiah 66:2). It's the humility that looks upon oneself with delight. This is the point of Paul. They "delight in their humility." This makes the NIV and NKJV especially good translations here, "false humility." They delight in the ways in which they have made themselves low. They were pressuring the Colossian believers to follow in their ways.

Remember in the sermon on the mount when Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 6:1). He then gave three illustrations of what it looked like to "practice your righteousness before men." He talked about those who sounded trumpets to capture everyone's attention to insure that everyone would see their piety as they gave their gifts into the offering boxes in the synagogue (Matt. 6:2). He talked about those who went to the most public of places and prayed long and loud prayers to insure that they could be seen and heard by many as they prayed (Matt. 6:5). He talked about those who neglected their appearances so that others would notice how ragged looking they were as an indication that they were fasting at that moment (Matt. 6:16). These Pharisees loved to practice their righteousness before men. They delighted in their self-serving acts of humiliation.

This is what Paul is getting at when he talks about those in Colossae who were "delighting in self-abasement." The exact form it was taking in this church may have been a bit different than the form it took with the Pharisees. But, the concept is the same. They were delighting in their low position. They were delighting in their false humility.

The conclusion to the words of Jesus is that they will have no reward in heaven (Matt. 6:1-18). They have already received their reward as people have witnessed their religious acts. They have already been rewarded by the pleasure that their mind receives as they know that others view them as righteous people. At the core of all of this is a "false piety." It's performing religious acts, which (in this case) may in an of themselves are perfectly acceptable before God, who delights in them. But, it's performing these righteous acts and then "delighting in them" as if you have now arrived and become someone special because of what you have done. This is what those in Colossae were doing. They had some sort of outward form of piety in that they were "humble." They were performing some kind of self-sacrificial deeds. And then, they were pressuring others to follow in their ways. Paul condemned their actions, presumably because it was a false humility, which was essentially a "false piety."

But, there was another type of false piety that was taking place in Colossae. We read in verse 18 that some were "delighting in ... the worship of the angels."

Such an activity may look religious. It may look spiritual. But it is false spirituality. It is "false piety." The Bible is clear: we are not to worship the angels. It may seem spiritual. It may seem like a religious thing to do. To the undiscerning, it may sound attractive. But, it is wrong. God,

Himself, is the only being in this entire universe that is worthy of our worship.

When the apostle John saw his great revelation of the future, there were several times that he was so overwhelmed with what he saw that he fell down and worshiped the one standing before him. After hearing the fourfold Hallelujah come forth, declaring that "the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns" (Rev. 19:6), he fell at the feet of an angel and began to worship him (Rev. 19:10). But, the angel said, "Do not do that; I am a fellow servant of yours and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus; worship God" (Rev. 19:10). Only a few chapters later, we read of the same thing taking place. When John had been shown the river of life and the tree of life, once again, John was so overcome with praise, that he fell down to worship at the feet of the angel" who showed him the wonderful things that would take place (Rev. 22:7). But, the angel said, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God" (Rev. 22:9). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that the edict from heaven comes, "Let all the angels of God worship [Jesus]" (Heb. 1:6).

This isn't too difficult for us to understand. God is the only one who is to be worshiped. Now, I don't believe that we, here at Rock Valley Bible Church, are susceptible to worshipping angels. But, I do think that we need to be attentive to the principle behind the error in Colossae. The principle is that they were worshipping God in ways that were false. They were putting forth a form of godliness, which was empty and shallow. They were engaging in spiritual activity that is actually forbidden in Scripture. But, as if that was bad enough, they were actually encouraging others in their false ways. When others weren't following their example, they were being ridiculed and manipulated into conforming to their false ways.

Don't fall susceptible to the false piety of others. When we arrive in chapter 3 in a few weeks, we will see what genuine, Christ-like piety looks like! It starts on the inside, with transformed hearts and minds, that seek the things above, not the things on earth. It works itself out primarily in attitudes of the heart, like compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience and endurance and forgiveness and love (Col. 2:12-14). It allows the gospel to sink into your hearts and do its transforming work in your life. It leads to wives, humbly submitting to their husbands (Col. 3:18). It leads to husbands sacrificially loving their wives (Col. 3:19). It leads to children obeying their parents (Col. 3:20). It leads to fathers encouraging their children (Col. 3:20). It leads to hard work (Col. 3:21-25). It leads to fair treatment of all (Col. 4:1).

This is genuine piety, to which we all need to follow, ... not the false piety of external, religious practices. Church family, don't fall susceptible to the "False Piety" of others. If you do, you will only lose your prize, which is Christ Jesus, Himself. You don't earn the prize through false humility and false worship. You gain your prize through faith alone in His work on the cross.

Let's turn our attention to another way in which you might be defrauded of your prize. I'm calling this ...
2. Feeble Hope (verse 18b)

Look at verse 18, "taking his stand on visions he has seen." From the best we can tell, Paul is talking about one who has a spiritual experience of some type, and then, comes to trust in the experience and teach others what he has learned through the experience, as an expert. In this case, there were those in Colossae who had received visions of some type, which taught them something, upon which they were placing their hope.

Taking your stand on a vision will "defraud you of the prize" of Christ, because it's a misplaced hope. I believe that Paul's point here is that their hope is feeble. It is groundless. It has no substance. It's origin comes from within the individual through a subjective experience, rather than from outside of the individual through an objective reality of the truth of God through His word. And yet, there were those in Colossae, who had experienced these things and were placing their hopes in their visions.

Lest we think that this is something that is far from us today, please know that there are many people who place their hope in their own experiences and feelings, rather than in truth. I remember hearing of a pastor in the Chicagoland area whose daughter was sick with some disease. After extensive treatments of all sorts, she simply wasn't getting better. In desperation, they turned to the occult, and tried some type of weegie board thing that is used to connect into the spiritual world for healing. And do you know what? She was healed. As a result, this pastor and his wife came to trust this device as something that can and ought to be used when others are sick. Eventually, this pastor was disciplined out of his church for taking his stand that this occultish object was worthy of being trusted. Eventually it killed him, as his trust was placed in the wrong place.

Now, perhaps that's an extreme example of taking a stand on one's vision, but there are more subtle ways that this takes place today. I have had countless conversations with people who have told me that God spoke to them. They have said something like this: "God told me this..." or "God told me that. ..." "God's calling me to this. ..." or "God's calling me to that. ..." "God's calling me to be involved in this ministry..." "God told me that I should quit my job and move. ..." "God told me that I should marry this individual. ..."

For the most part, in my experience of dealing with those who speak like this, many of the things that they say have been fine and legitimate. There's nothing wrong with their conclusions that they draw, as many of them have ministry implications. But, the first part of what they have said has bothered me. It's the "God told me" that has caused concern in my mind. Here's what's hard about it: who am I to say that God didn't say that? If they say that God told them something, they will never accept my correction of them or counsel in any other direction, because, they have taken their stand upon the vision that they experienced. You can't argue with them. You can't show them where they are wrong. You can't offer them a better way, because the experience overrides all truth. Just try this sometime. If you don't want to have anyone persuading you otherwise, just try pulling the "God told me," and you will find that nobody can persuade you away from what you really want to do. **The one with the experience is never at the mercy of the one with the truth.**

As I was thinking of a way to illustrate this, I thought about how crazy our dreams are sometimes. Here's my dream that I dreamt last night. I was in a foreign land on a missions trip. We were seeking to think about what to do in the ministry to the children there. Some how, in some way, I was given a snowmobile/jet-ski type of vehicle and was told to head north to find out what others were doing in regards to children's ministry. As I rode north, I began to find myself in this place that feels like the arctic ocean, with frigid water and floating ice-caps. I'm cruising along just fine. The snowmobile characteristic of my vehicle worked well on the ice caps. the jet-ski characteristic of my vehicle worked well

on the water. Suddenly, I found myself on the ground in a snow-covered forest. As I'm zooming through the trees, I soon see some trees lights and soon begin to hear some sound. As I break through the clearing, I find out that it's a school. The children were putting on some type of Christmas presentation. One of the women in our church was one of the teachers. Another man in the church was also teaching the children. I arrived just as the presentation was ending. But, one of our high school students was there, leading a game of soccer in the snow, and I began to play some soccer with the children. As I was playing, soon a man stood up to preach. I went to seminary with this man and graduated with him 15 years ago, but haven't spoken with him since.

And now, suppose that I "took my stand upon this vision that I had seen" and come to you this morning and announce that God told me to begin a children's mission in Siberia in conjunction with my former seminary friend. Should you question me, my defense is easy, "I had a vision from God." No amount of persuading can change my mind, because I'm the spiritual one through whom God is communicating His will for our church. This is the vision that God has given me! You need to follow my vision if you really want to be in tune with God!

How ridiculous! But, this is the sort of thing that was going on in Colossae. There were those who had these visions. They stood by them. They sought to pressure others to follow in their ways, if they are really to be spiritual. In other words, the fundamental authority was the vision, upon which these people stood, rather than the truth as it is found in Christ. Who knows, perhaps these dreams were coming from a pagan/demonic origin (from which many of the believers of Colossae came from). These visions were not grounded in the truth. These visions were entirely subjective.

So, don't be defrauded of your prize by those who place a premium upon their own subjective experience. Their hope is in vain. And if you go after them, your hope is equally in vain as well. Don't be defrauded of your prize through (1) False Piety, or (2) Feeble Hope, or ...

3. Vain Pride (verse 18c)

At the end of verse 18, we see these that there were those in Colossae who were "inflated without cause by his fleshly mind." I believe that this phrase here relates to the previous two phrases. It describes the prideful attitude by which those false teachers in Colossae were promoting their false piety and feeble hope. They were convinced that they were right. They were convinced that their religious practices were the only way to live. They were convinced that you should be worshiping angels. They were convinced that their visions were coming directly from the Lord, and that they were receiving them because of their special, spiritual status. As they had completely figured out the religious life (i.e. how to be completely spiritual, what to do, and how to act), they became very prideful. They became very prideful, thinking of themselves as hot stuff, when in actuality, they were wrong. But, Paul told these precious Colossian believers not to be defrauded of their prize by following after these empty talkers.

True ministers of the gospel won't be proud in the things they know, or in the things that they teach, or in the manner in which they live. Moses, the great leader of the people of Israel, "was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). David was a humble man, who openly confessed his sin for all the world to read about (Psalm 32, 51). John the Baptist was humble, saying that "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Paul was humble, considering himself, "less than the least of all God's people" (Eph. 3:8). But, this wasn't the attitude of the false teachers in Colossae. They were proud, boastful men, who sought to persuade others into their own ways, and not in the ways of Christ.

Was this not the problem of the Pharisees? They loved their pious religion. They thought that they had it all together, because of all the things that they did. "They [did] all their deeds to be noticed by men. They broaden[ed] their phylacteries and lengthen[ed] the tassels of their garments. They love[d] the places of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men" (Matt. 23:5-7). To these people, Jesus pronounced the greatest of curses. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation" (Matt. 23:14). You make a great show of your religion! But, your religion is worthless! You will receive a greater condemnation.

Jesus called them "blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Matt. 23:24). They attempted to guide the way for others, but, being blind, they didn't really know the way to go. They neglected the weightier issues of the law, like "justice and mercy and faithfulness," and put great focus upon the smallest of issues, like tithing their tiny little spices (Matt. 23:23). Perhaps worst of all is that they didn't lead people into the kingdom of heaven. On the contrary, Jesus said to them, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in" (Matt. 23:13).

This is exactly the issue that Paul is dealing with here in Colossae. Oh, to be sure, the form is different. The false teachers in Colossae aren't pure-bread Pharisees, who had practiced their religious ways for centuries and had developed an entire tradition on how to live. But, the net result was the same. Those in Colossae were wrong in their practices. They had trusted in their own religious attainments and experiences. Perhaps the worst of all is that they didn't lead people into the kingdom of heaven. On the contrary, they actually led people away from the kingdom. They focused their attention upon religious practices and experiences, rather than focusing their heart and soul upon Christ, which leads me nicely to my final point this morning. Don't be deluded of your prize, through living a (1) False Piety, trusting a (2) Feeble Hope, demonstrating a (3) Vain Pride, and having an ...

4. Empty Faith (verse 19)

Look at verse 19. This verse is the greatest tragedy of them all, "and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God." Ultimately, this is the root of their problem. They had an empty faith, because they didn't hold fast to Jesus, the only author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2).

Clenched in their fists, clinging for their lives, was not the sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ. Rather, clenched in their fists was their own righteousness. They held tightly to their "false piety" and to their "feeble hope." When it was all said and done, and they opened up their hands to show you what they had to offer, all you could see was their own works of righteousness. But, the Bible is very clear about these

things. It's not by works of righteousness that we have done, but it's according to His mercy that He saved us (Titus 3:4). It's not by our own achievements, but it's by grace through faith that we have the promise of eternal life (Eph. 2:8-9).

If you would ever be saved from your sins, you need to "hold fast to the head." That is, you need to "hold fast to Jesus Christ." This is simply a synonym for saving faith. The Bible uses many different terms to describe a saving response to God. Paul told the Philippian Jailor to "**Believe** in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 17:31). Joel says, "Whoever **calls** on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32). In the Proverbs, Solomon said, "**Trust** in the Lord with all your heart" (Prov. 3:5). The Psalmist said that the LORD favors those who "**wait** for His lovingkindness" (Ps. 147:11). Isaiah told the people of Judah to "**look** to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 45:22). Moses told the Israelites, "You shall **fear** the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him" (Deut. 10:20).

That's the picture that we have of Paul here: "clinging to the Lord," much like Psalm 63:8, "My soul clings to the LORD." It's a great picture of salvation. It's a picture of hope. It's a picture of desperation. It's a picture of importance. It's a picture of priority. It's a picture of dependence. It's all that we are holding fast to all that He is. This is salvation. This is what the false teachers in Colossae were missing. Christ was optional to them. Christ was of secondary importance. Christ was not their only hope. They were clinging to things of no importance, like false humility and the worship of angels and visions they experienced.

I have heard the question asked many times before: "If your house was burning down and you only had time to grab only one item as you rush out of your house, what would you take?" The answer always comes back, "My photo albums." Why? Because they are indispensable. They are non-replaceable. So also is Jesus indispensable to your salvation. He is non-replaceable. He is the only thing that matters. I don't care what else you have in your arms, desperately clinging to. If you don't have Jesus, you don't have salvation. I don't care if you give half of your wealth away. I don't care if you pray four hours a day. I don't care if you fast every Tuesday and Saturday. I don't care if you don't wash yourself for a month. I don't care if you experience extraordinary dreams. I don't care if you attend church every day of your life. **If you are not clinging to Jesus Christ, you don't have salvation.**

Notice how Jesus is described in this verse. He is simply described as "the head." This is a reference to the authority of Jesus. Back in chapter 1, verse 18, we see the same terminology being used, "He is also the head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything." Jesus is the head of the church. As the head, He has all authority. With all authority, it means that he should have first place in everything.

This was fundamentally the problem in Colossae. Jesus wasn't taking first place in everything. Rather, it was the super-spiritual religious practices that came to have supreme importance. It was the subjective experience (of visions) that came to take priority. But, the sovereign, authoritative head of the church was being neglected. Oh, church family, how important it is for us to see Jesus Christ as head of the church! We bow to Him! We trust in Him! May we never stray and be captivated by any other religious practice or experience.

Lest you think that this is a mute point, please consider that there are churches that will deny the unique headship of Jesus Christ over his church. Particularly, I'm thinking about the Roman Catholic Church. Listen to what the Council of Ferrara-Florence stated as their belief (A.D. 1438 - 1439). This council stated that "the Holy Apostolic See and Roman Pontiff hold the primacy over all the world; that the Roman Pontiff is the successor of Peter, prince of the Apostles; that he is the true vicar of Christ, the head of the whole Church, the Father and teacher of all Christians." [\[1\]](#) In other words, the pope is the true head of the church. This is the official teaching of the church, which still stands today. Such a belief cannot be revoked, as it was the official word given in the council.

During the days of the Reformation, if you would be so bold as to deny such a statement, it might very well cost you your life. John Hus, the Reformer, had the audacity to stand up before Rome and declare that Jesus Christ was the head of the church, not the pope. For such a crime, he was burned at the stake.

Never has there been a church that has so focused its attention upon external, religious practices and trusted in visions that it has seen than the Roman Catholic Church. Just think about their religious practices. They light candles, they say very specific liturgy, they perform acts of penance, they follow through the stations of the cross, they genuflect before entering church, they anoint themselves with holy water when entering a sanctuary, they wave incense at certain ceremonies, etc., ... Furthermore, there are constantly visions of the virgin Mary to which people give homage to.

Did you hear about what took place this past week in Fountain Valley California? Below I have included the story, as it appeared on one of the major news wires.

FOUNTAIN VALLEY, Calif. - As a chocolatier to the rich and famous, Martucci Angiano has posed with many celebrities — but on Thursday she held in her hand a figure that dazzles her more than any Hollywood star. Workers at Angiano's gourmet chocolate company, Bodega Chocolates, discovered under a vat a 2-inch-tall column of chocolate drippings that they believe bears a striking resemblance to the Virgin Mary. Since the discovery Monday [August 14, 2006], Angiano's employees have spent much of their time hovering over the tiny figure, praying and placing rose petals and candles around it. "I was raised to believe in the Virgin Mary, but this still gives me the chills," Angiano said as she balanced the dark brown figure in her hand. "Everyone should see this."

Kitchen worker Cruz Jacinto was the first to spot the lump of melted chocolate when she began her shift Monday cleaning up drippings that had accumulated under a large vat of dark chocolate. Chocolate drippings usually harden in thin, flat strips on wax paper, but Jacinto said she froze when she noticed the unusual shape of this cast-off: It looked just like the Virgin Mary on the prayer card she always carries in her right pocket. "My eyes went directly to the chocolate. When I come in, the first thing I do is look at the clock, but this time I didn't look at the clock. My eyes went directly to the chocolate," said Jacinto, dressed in a hair net and apron as she paused from her work. "I thought, 'Am I the only one who can see this?' I picked it up and I felt emotion just come over me. For me, it was a sign."

The chocolate, on display for most of the week in the front of the company gift shop, now rests in a plastic case in a back room and is brought out only for curious visitors. The stack of hardened confection has a wide base and tapers gently toward a rounded top, giving the appearance of a female figure with her head tilted slightly to the right. The dark brown melting chocolate hardened into subtle layers that resemble the folds of a gown and a flowing veil. A tiny white circle, about the size of a pencil eraser, sits in the upper center of the creation, just above a slight ridge that runs across it. Cruz says the white speck is the head of the Baby Jesus as he is held in Mary's folded arms.

For Jacinto, the discovery came just in time. The single mother has struggled with marital problems for months and says she was about to lose her faith. "This has given me renewed faith. I have big problems right now, personally, and lately I've been saying that God doesn't exist," she said, pulling the dog-eared prayer card out of her pocket. "This has given me renewed faith." [2]

This is far from a one-time occurrence. This type of thing takes place in the Roman Catholic Church all the time. People are always spotting silhouettes of the virgin Mary or of Jesus in tortillas or in grilled cheese sandwiches or in cement cracks under bridges or in streaked windows (which I had an opportunity to see a few years ago in Joliet, Illinois). And now, this past week, Mary appears in chocolate drippings.

I don't believe that it is any accident that these types of things take place in the Roman Catholic Church more often than in others, because, they have replaced the head of the church. In so doing, they are susceptible to overemphasizing the external, religious practices and visions, but, that ought not to be us. Let us hold fast to the head of the church, Jesus Christ. He told His disciples, "I will build My Church" (Matt. 16:18). He does this by supplying everything that the church needs (see verse 19). He supplies the church by providing the right people and the needed giftedness and the appropriate resources. He provides everything that the church needs to grow.

Then, He alone grows the church. The growth of the church "is from God." The growth that Jesus does is in us to love Him, and to shun the pressure to place an emphasis upon (1) False Piety, (2) Feeble Hope, (3) Vain Pride, and (4) Empty Hope. May we cling to Him!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on August 20, 2006 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] This statement is taken directly from the following website: <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/councils.php>.

[2] This article was found on <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/14400252/>.