

Series Colossians

This Message In Christ Alone We Take Our Stand

Scripture Colossians 2:8-15

In this message we move into the “heavy” significant portion of the letter, to the section in which Paul takes direct aim at the errors which were being propagated among the believers. Paul, who was in prison in Rome, wrote to the Colossians after Epaphras reported on conditions. The report was favorable in many ways, but Epaphras also mentioned that the believers in Colosse were being taught information which was threatening their spiritual well-being.

The false teaching is never explicitly described in the letter, but it is easy to identify from statements written by Paul. For example, Paul emphasized the sovereign power and authority of Jesus several times, an indication that some in Colosse were questioning the authority of Jesus. Later in the passage Paul refers to the inadequacy of the Old Testament Law and circumcision, indications that some believers at Colosse were trying to integrate Jewish beliefs into the New Testament gospel. In a future passage, Paul will warn his readers about legalistic and ritualistic behaviors — teaching which implied that some people were trying to maintain their salvation through their own efforts.

We can make several assumptions about the person or persons who were behind the false teaching. First of all, we can assume that such persons were members of the fellowship, and individuals who were respected by other believers, perhaps because of age or prestige. If the teacher was not a fellow believer, an “insider,” neither he nor his ideas would have been accepted.

Secondly, we can assume that the teacher was a Jewish background believer, an individual who felt that certain rituals and actions of the Old Testament Law carried over into the New Testament era. In the early Church, there were significant difficulties in integrating believers from Jewish and Gentile cultural backgrounds, mainly because the Jewish believers insisted that Gentiles had to adopt Jewish customs in order to become members of the Church.

Paul, although he had been trained as a Pharisee, strongly disagreed with the attitudes of many of his fellow Jews who had placed their faith in Jesus. He taught that individuals became members of the Church solely by trusting in the salvation that God provided through the atonement of Jesus on the cross. According to Paul, all believers, whether of Jewish or Gentile backgrounds, were united with God in and through Christ Jesus, had equal standing in the Church, and that any observance of Jewish traditions in the Church would detract from the significance of Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection from the tomb.

[The theological differences between Jewish and Gentile believers became so vehement that the Apostles and Church Elders called a council meeting to debate this issue. The report of this meeting is in Acts chapter 15. After persuasive speeches by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, it was decided that every person was saved in exactly the same way, through the grace of the Lord Jesus, by faith, and not by conformity to the law. Unfortunately, it took a long time for some believers from the Jewish cultural background to adjust to that decision.]

There is one more assumption we can make, that the believers in Colosse were influenced by the Greco-Roman culture in which they lived. These deep-set cultural influences of Greek philosophy would not have been instantaneously replaced by mature Biblical understanding. It normally takes some time before new believers shed their cultural baggage and develop in their faith.

The Greek philosophers had a dualistic way of thinking about the world. They believed that all things related to the spirit were good and that all physical and material things were evil, and that the spiritual and the physical worlds had no connecting points. The implications of this were enormous. For example, because of their belief in the inherent evil of matter, it was impossible for Greek philosophers to accept the incarnation of God in Jesus. According to the philosophers, Jesus could not be truly human if he was conceived by God's Spirit, nor could He be truly God if He was human.

Greek philosophers thought of salvation as an escape from the human body. They developed an elaborate system whereby the escape was possible through special mystical knowledge, which could be gained through visions, superstitious practices, and controlled behavior. Such ideas were embedded in the thinking of Gentile background believers.

Based on the information in the letter, we can conclude that the errors which were being taught in Colosse were a combination of Judaism and paganism mixed together with the truth of the gospel message. Technically speaking, the false teachers in Colosse did not deny Christ; they just refused to give Him the honor and glory and centrality He deserved. They had placed their faith in Him, but they did not give Him the supreme place in their lives, nor were they maintaining their spiritual lives by faith in Christ alone. I think you will recognize how Paul begins to address these issues in the passage we will read today.

Read Colossians 2:8-15

This section begins with a strong warning: “See to it;” “Be careful that no one takes you captive.” The Greek word for “take captive” was used to describe kidnappings and the seizing of prisoners of war. The Colossian believers had previously been rescued by God’s saving grace from darkness and brought into the kingdom of God’s Son (*Colossians 1:13*), and Paul did not want them to again become enslaved because of false teaching.

Paul described the information dispensed by the false teachers as “hollow and deceptive philosophy.” He then gave three reasons why the philosophy should be rejected. First, it was “according to the tradition of men.” Paul didn’t explain what tradition he was referring to, but, as I explained earlier, it could have been a tradition based on the Jewish law or it could be a reference to something from the Greek/Roman culture. The point is that these traditions were not from God, but rather originated with people.

Second, Paul wrote that the philosophy of the false teachers “depended on ... the basic principles of this world.” The word for “basic principles” could refer to the rules of grammar and mathematics learned by schoolchildren, or to the mystical unseen powers which some people thought controlled the universe. On the one hand, Paul was implying that the basic principles of the world were really not very enlightened or sophisticated, and on the other hand, he was suggesting that they were associated with the powers of evil. Paul probably had both meanings in his mind when he chose the word for “basic principles.”

The third reason to reject the “deceptive philosophy of the false teachers” was that it was not “according to Christ;” that is, it was not in harmony or agreement with the truth that was revealed in Christ. Paul insisted in all his teaching that Christ was the standard by which all theological teaching and doctrine must be measured, and he urged that all religious ideas that did not conform to the truth that had been revealed in Christ had to be rejected by believers.

In verses 9 and 10, Paul reemphasized some basic truths which were “according to Christ.” I say “reemphasized” because Paul previously made two very important similar claims: that Jesus was the personal and complete revelation of God (*see 1:15-20*); and that Christ is in every believer (*see 1:25-27*). In chapter 1, he stated, “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,” and “God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Verses 9 and 10 restate those awesome truths: “In Christ alone all the fullness of Deity ‘lives,’” and “You have been given fullness in Christ.”

The word “fullness” appears several times in this letter. Paul wanted his readers to understand that everything that God is was in Jesus — all the qualities, characteristics, attributes, the very essence of God. The incarnation changed His appearance but, as a man, Jesus did not lose any of the fullness which He possessed. Paul emphasized this truth because it directly refuted the teaching of the Greek philosophers, and it is the truth which is foundational for the next major point: “believers have been given fullness in Christ.”

This may be the most significant thought in the letter! Because believers are in union with Christ, they share in the fullness of God! This verse does not mean that we can be perfect like God or equal to God, but it does mean that all the resources of God are available to us in Christ. In Him every spiritual need can be satisfied. That’s the main point that Paul was making: Since God was in Christ in His fullness, and the Colossian believers were in Christ, there was no need for them to listen to or accept the “philosophy” of the false teachers, who insisted that something in addition to Jesus was necessary if there was to be a relationship with God. Paul wanted the believers to know that they had all they needed in Jesus and that He was all-sufficient for them.

Verb tenses are important in Paul’s letters. Notice the verb tense in verse 10: “You have been given fullness.” For every believer, the “fullness in Christ” is a present reality. This means that “to receive Christ” is to be filled with Christ. It’s ours now, this side of heaven.

There is a tremendously important application to this truth: The presence of Christ on earth continues on in the community of believers. Just as the fullness of Deity lived in bodily form in Jesus when He was on earth, the fullness of Deity in the person of Christ lives in the bodies of believers while they are here on earth. This means that believers embody the personal presence of God, and this means that they are expected to demonstrate the qualities of God here on earth. Believers are expected to be obedient to the Father just as Jesus was. They are expected to live out the reality of the Kingdom of God just as Jesus did. They are expected to lay down their lives for others just as Jesus did. Because Christ lives, believers live. Remember the song we sang last week, "You Have Everything When You Have Christ!"

In the last part of verse 10 Paul makes a statement concerning the lordship of Christ: Christ is "the head over every power and authority." Earlier in chapter 1 Paul wrote that Christ is the "head of the Church." Here, in verse 10, the authority of Christ is expanded to include every power in the universe. Everything is under the sovereign lordship of Christ. The implication of this truth should have been obvious to the Colossian believers: If the Lord Christ rules over all authorities, then He alone is the ultimate mediator of God's rule. No entity in God's creation is able to stand alongside Him, or to be His equal. God's salvation was fully accomplished by Him and people can enter into a relationship with God only through Him. Jesus alone is fully adequate and sufficient for all human spiritual needs.

In verses 11-15 Paul combines the themes of the sufficiency of Christ and the believer's complete identity in Christ. He mentions three benefits which God in Christ has provided to us. These are identity with Christ (*verses 11-13*), the forgiveness of sins (*verses 13 and 14*), and victory over the forces of evil (*verse 15*).

In describing the first benefit Paul contrasts human circumcision with the spiritual circumcision performed by Christ. In the Old Testament, circumcision was the symbol of Israel's covenant identity with God. Circumcision affected the body in a physical and external way. Unfortunately, the form of circumcision commanded in the Mosaic law did not remove sins or change the attitudes of people. The circumcision of the Old Testament was merely symbolic.

For the New Testament believer, circumcision is spiritual. It results in a much more significant change in a person than cutting away skin. It affects the inward being of a person. This is why it is sometimes referred to in Scripture as “circumcision of the heart.”

According to verse 11, it is Christ Himself who “cuts off” the body of flesh, which represents the sinful nature. The Greek word for “putting off” indicates both stripping off and casting away, like what would be done to some very filthy clothing. Notice that the context of verse 11 refers to a past specific time. The phrase, “You were ... circumcised,” refers to the point in time when the person was “rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son.” In other words, when the person was redeemed and forgiven.

Because the circumcision is by the sovereign Lord Christ, new believers can have confidence that they are included in the New Testament covenant community, the Church. I think you can appreciate what this verse would mean to the Gentiles who were converting to Christ. Many of them were told by Jewish believers that they had to endure physical circumcision in order to become members of the covenant community. Paul was correcting this false teaching. Faith alone in Christ meant full identity in Christ.

In describing the second benefit, Paul uses the metaphor of baptism. Baptism is the picture of the believer’s experience of being buried with Christ and raised with Him. Of course, no humans were actual participants in the physical death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, but, spiritually speaking, believers become participants “through faith in the power of God.” Verse 13 explains the application for believers: Just as God reached into the grave and gave new life to Jesus, God reaches into the deadness of sinful people to give them new life.

Let’s keep in mind that Paul was writing about the sufficiency of Christ and the believer’s complete identity in Christ. “Through faith” believers are identified with Christ through His cutting away of the sinful fleshly nature and His death, burial, and resurrection, and, because they are identified with Christ, believers have all the fullness of being in Christ. The only condition is that the believer must have “faith ... in the power of God.” Notice how many times the believer’s identity with Christ is mentioned in these verses: verse 9 “in Christ”; verse 10 “in Christ”; verse 11 “in Him;” in verse 12 “buried with Him” and “raised with Him,” and in verse 13 “made alive with Christ.”

Identity with Christ; Fullness of Christ. Paul wanted his readers to understand that they needed nothing more than Christ to have a complete salvation, and that the false teachers were wrong in what they were proclaiming. Two verses from the previous message are worth repeating here: “Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were (originally) taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (*Colossians 2:6-7*). People receive Christ by faith, and it is by faith that they must continue on with Him.

In order to make his point even more convincing, Paul next goes on to describe what God does for believers. In verses 14 and 15, Paul uses illustrations from two unusual sources: the Jewish Torah and from Roman military parades. The opening thought is “God forgave us all our sins.” The emphasis is on the word “all.” How all-encompassing is this word “all?” Based on what Christ accomplished “on the cross,” the “written code was cancelled.” This is the allusion to the Jewish Torah and the Law. The Old Testament law made people realize how sinful they were. The Law did not take away sins. However, Christ’s death on the cross removed the condemnation of the Law “that was against us and that stood opposed to us.” God took it away, nailing it to the cross.

Not only did God cancel out the accusations of the law, but he also conquered and disarmed the evil powers and authorities which controlled the behaviors of people. The picture in verse 15 is of conquered soldiers who were paraded through the streets of a city by Roman military officers as evidence of victory in battle. This is what God in Christ did over the powers and authorities; He triumphed over them by the cross. All challenges to God’s reign were dealt with on the cross.

Paul’s message to the Colossian believers is clear and pointed: Christ has defeated and replaced all other spiritual authorities, and, God’s salvation is mediated solely through Christ. Paul wanted his readers to stick with the truth of the gospel, and to rely on the Lordship of Christ.

The message of this letter is very important for today. The same kind of seductions of the false philosophy that enticed the Colossian believers away from Christ are rampant in the contemporary church. There are all kinds of “fine-sounding arguments” advanced by many religious leaders that are acceptable to many people, but such arguments devalue Christ because they are shaped by the myths and values of humanistic culture.

Some examples of these “arguments” include the prosperity gospel which legitimizes materialistic greed; the advancement of popular psychology on television; advancement of Spiritism and the occult; confusion of politics of the religious right with righteousness; and general attitudes of “frivolity.” Believers must see through the worthless superficiality of the claims of modern false teachers. They must live with the faith that originally brought them to Christ.