

“In Him”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

Texts: Colossians 2:6-15; Isaiah 29:9-16

One of the unique emphases of Reformed theology is the doctrine of “union with Christ,” which arises from reflection upon the letters of Paul. Union with Christ is the answer to one of the theological problems created by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The problem is this—since Jesus has ascended into heaven where he presently rules over all things, how then do we participate in all his saving benefits since he is no longer physically present with us on the earth? The answer given throughout the New Testament, and especially in the letters of Paul, is through our union with Christ—a union established between each believer and Jesus by the indwelling Holy Spirit, a union which commences immediately the moment we believe in Jesus and are justified (being declared righteous). This union endures until we die and enter the Lord’s presence. To believe in Jesus is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit in which Jesus has baptized us. To believe in Jesus is to be united to him in his three-fold on-going office of prophet, priest, and king. To be baptized into Jesus is to be baptized into his death and resurrection, the visible sign and seal of Jesus’ saving work and of our union with him. To believe in Jesus is to be “in Christ.”

The believer’s union with Christ is just one of the points Paul makes in his response to the so-called Colossian heresy, which the Epistle of Colossians is written to refute. In refuting this heresy, Paul has argued for the supremacy of Jesus by speaking of Jesus as creator of all things and firstborn from the dead (in his resurrection), thereby commencing his work of new creation in which Jesus reconciles sinners to God and is head of his church. Through our union with Jesus, we are members of his church which is his body (manifest through membership in a local congregation). Because we are said to be “in Christ,” we are in union with Jesus in his death and resurrection, and as Paul points out in verse 24 of chapter 1, we are also united to Jesus in the fellowship of his sufferings.

Throughout the opening chapter of Colossians, Paul has made his case for the supremacy of Jesus as Lord of all things, based upon that which was revealed to Paul by Jesus himself, what Paul describes as the mystery hidden for long ages past in the Old Testament, to which Paul repeatedly alludes as he makes his case. In fact, there are many overlooked but loud echoes from the Old Testament in Colossians 1. The mystery now revealed through the preaching of the gospel, is the person and work of Jesus, which Paul says was being proclaimed throughout much of the first century Mediterranean world in churches such as those in Colossae (to which Paul writes) and Laodicea (which he mentions). When Jesus entered human history to accomplish the work of our redemption, the mystery was “revealed.” This is worth considering as one of the main points in Paul’s refutation of the Colossian heresy. Nothing secret about Christianity. Jesus’ saving work was very public and unfolds in ordinary human history—not within the human heart, nor tied to secret powers and forces supposedly at work in the universe.

There is much packed into our text (vv. 6-15) of Colossians 2, so we will proceed as follows. First, we will take up Paul’s discussion in verses 6-7 of the importance of holding fast to the things which the Colossians have been taught by Epaphras, their pastor. Then, second, we will consider what Paul means when he speaks of “plausible arguments” (v. 4), the kinds of arguments the Christians in Colossae were facing from the false teachers—that which Paul will describe as “philosophy, deceit, and tradition” grounded in elemental things, not in Christ (v. 8). Third, in verses 9-10, Paul explains that all true spiritual fulness is found only in Jesus—God incarnate. Paul goes on to explain in verse 11-15 how

Christians are united to Christ so as to experience this spiritual fullness. Then we will wrap up by making several points of application.

Turning now to our text, recall that having counseled the Colossians in the previous section (1:24-2:5) not to be taken in by “*plausible arguments*” (2:4) like those associated with the Colossian heresy, Paul exhorts the Colossians to continue in what they have already been taught—the gospel preached to them by Epaphras. In verses 6-7 Paul tells them, “*therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*” Paul will explain what he means by these “plausible arguments” in what follows (v. 8), but his emphasis falls first upon exhorting the Colossians to cling to what they have already been taught.

Paul was trained as a Rabbi, and he speaks like one here. Paul refers to that which the Colossians have *already* received—the proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord and reconciler (the gospel), which was preached to them, and which they have believed. This is the means through which they are established in the faith, and about which they give thanks. This is an especially important point in an age which had nothing like our modern Bibles or biblical references. What was taught and proclaimed orally must be carefully memorized and then passed down to others. The implication of believing this gospel once proclaimed is that the Colossians are to “walk in him” (i.e., live in the light of Jesus’ teaching) as they have been instructed. There are strong parallels with Paul’s statements here and second temple Judaism in which we read of Rabbis instructing the faithful to pass on the tradition (the oral law) to the next generation.¹ But tradition has both a positive and a negative sense in the New Testament.

The negative sense of tradition is that which is nothing but the “rules of men” with its origins in so-called human (not biblical) wisdom. Such arises in Israel when biblical tradition—the careful passing down of the teaching of Scripture—is mixed with human tradition such as that added by the Jews (thereby corrupting the biblical tradition), so that in Mark 7:8, Jesus can say to the Pharisees, “*you leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.*” Although great care was taken which such tradition and it was carefully memorized and transmitted, in second temple Judaism possessing “the tradition” became an end in itself. These added human traditions became more important than what was taught in the biblical tradition—that a Messiah was coming who would deal with the root of all human problems, sin. The traditions of men which Jesus condemns leaves no place for him or his saving work.

Paul, on the other hand, instructs the Colossian Christians to hold fast to the doctrines which have been taught them by apostolic preachers—that Jesus is Lord. To affirm that Jesus is Lord is but a way of summarizing the points made in the Christ hymn in verses 10-15 (tradition passed down from the apostles) in which Christians confess of Jesus:

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

¹ Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 92-93.

Christians are to cling to this “tradition” passed down to them and to live their lives in light of these truths. This tradition is not mere information for information’s sake. Nor does this tradition serve the purpose of marking Christians off from the rest of the culture as in Judaism. Christians are to be known by what we believe and how we live, not by public demonstrations of piety (such as those described by Jesus in Matthew 5-6), the clothing we wear, what we eat or do not eat, or by pilgrimages to a holy city (Jerusalem), as taught in the Jewish traditions of men. Christians confess the content of our tradition as a profession of faith, not as a matter of national or racial superiority (as in Judaism of the first century).

In verse 8, Paul explains what he means by “plausible arguments.” He writes, “*see to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.*” The Colossian heresy involves philosophy, deceit, and tradition. When Paul speaks of philosophy, we ought not take him to mean philosophy in the modern sense—an academic discipline which includes epistemology (how we know what we know), ontology (what is), ethics (how we act) and aesthetics (beauty). While there is much in modern philosophy which is antithetical to Christianity, many Christian theologians (especially in the Reformed and Catholic traditions) understand philosophy to be the “queen of the sciences”—providing much help to theologians in speaking about truth, being, ethics, and so on. The problem with much of modern philosophy is that it sees itself as “king,” and in far too many instances proposes alternate views of knowing, being, and ethics while self-consciously rejecting even the possibility of Christian approaches to such things.

In Paul’s day, however, the term philosophy is a much broader term than that just described (a technical academic discipline). “Philosophy” refers to any system of thought—the Pharisees had a philosophy, the Stoics had a philosophy, the Romans held to various philosophies, and so on. So too the Colossian heretics have a philosophy, but the term does not tell us anything about the specifics of what they believed. It may even be that the false teachers spoke of their own teaching as a “philosophy.”² Paul does tell us that this philosophy—whatever it was—is characterized by “empty deceit,” which denied the reality of God’s revelation of himself in his word—specifically the Lordship of Jesus over all of creation as well as Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Such a philosophy is not true, and therefore “deceitful.”

The reason why all such philosophy is false is because it arises from human tradition (i.e., human origin). The tradition of which Paul spoke previously and in which he urged the Colossians to walk, was that of apostolic preaching (about the person and work of Christ from God’s word) coming from men who were eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus. It was tradition (i.e., doctrinal content) which had its origin in God’s self-revelation and which was passed on orally to the Colossians through preaching, then through Paul’s letter, and then down to us in the pages of Holy Scripture. What the Colossians were facing was teaching which had its origin not in God’s revelation—but in a distortion of that revelation (some sort of Jewish heresy), which was then mixed with local pagan superstition.

In utter contrast, God’s revelation is grounded in God’s acts—the things God does in history. Jesus Christ came into the world in real human flesh—and in him, Paul says, the fulness of God was pleased to dwell (1:19). If Jesus was not God in the flesh, then Christianity is false and like all human systems, a philosophy, based upon deceit and human tradition. This means that Christianity is potentially falsifiable because it is tied to history, what God says and does. If God did not say or do, Christianity is false. The likelihood of Christianity proven to be false is nil because past events (Jesus’ resurrection from the dead) cannot be denied, especially when the evidence for them is so great. In fact, the resurrection of Jesus is

² Moo, Colossians, 186-187.

among the most defensible facts of human history. Christians stake everything on the empty tomb.

The Colossian heresy is grounded in a distortion of Scripture when biblical texts are read improperly (out of their redemptive-historical context) and made subject to human opinion. “I think God is like.” “God is what I think him to be.” “God does the things that I think he should do.” “God does not do the things I do not want him to.” Such a God, frankly, is not the God of the Bible, but a figment of the human imagination. Such a “god” in an idol. We find echoes throughout this section of Colossians from Isaiah 29:13 (a part of our Old Testament lesson), where Isaiah speaks of idolaters as those who draw near to God with their lips, but whose hearts are far from him. Idolaters hold fast to commandments taught by men. Paul’s indictment of the false teachers in Colossae also echoes verses 9-10 of Isaiah 29, where YHWH speaks of a people who blind themselves, and so come under the judgment of God. Self-inflicted spiritual blindness is the very essence of idolatry.³

This is why Paul harshly condemns this human philosophy then challenging the Colossians, because by its very nature this teaching is purely subjective and grounded in mere opinion. It is inwardly focused, secretive, and requires spiritual gurus and teachers to explain. It is deceitful because it denies Jesus by redefining him as something other than God in the flesh, who created all things, who reconciles us to God by that blood he shed on the cross, and who by virtue of his resurrection from the dead, brings about a new creation, in which Jesus is the head of a new humanity, his church. No other religion is grounded in such an unassailable fact as Jesus’ resurrection.

Paul also mentions “elemental spirits” which are contrary to Christ. There is much ink split about what Paul means by this. There are three main interpretations of this phrase. The most popular interpretation sees elemental spirits as spiritual beings (angels or demons). Since Jesus is said to make a spectacle of these forces on the cross (v. 15), this must be to what Paul is referring here. The problem with this view is that the word *stoichea* (elements) is not used this way in the first century. Another interpretation is that Paul is referring to “elemental principles,” to which he will refer later in this letter—such as keeping holy days, avoiding certain foods, and extreme asceticism. The same problem arises with this view because the word *stoichea* in Paul’s day almost always refers to the basic material elements of the world as understood by the ancients—air, earth, fire, water—and not to laws, rules or principles.⁴

The third way to understand Paul’s use of elemental spirits avoids the problems with the other interpretations. It involves looking at the term against the backdrop of the paganism of Paul’s day, and which was widely accepted in places like the Lycus Valley. The pagans worshiped the sun, moon, stars, various animals, and other imaginary deities associated with the elements, or physical things, or creatures, as interpreted through pagan categories. Physical things were worshiped because the pagans thought they had spiritual powers which could be mastered by those enlightened to do so. This fits with Paul’s description of a “philosophy” based in deceit and human tradition, and which, by its very nature must deny Jesus’s supremacy as creator of all things.

The Colossian heresy involved seeking spiritual powers and finding cosmic forces in or behind material things—powers, spirits, principles. There were spirits hiding behind every rock, living in every grove of

³ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 860-863.

⁴ See the discussions in: Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 98-100; and Moo, Colossians, 187-193.

trees (as in revivals of paganism in our own day). There were clues found in the movement of the sun, moon, and stars of the zodiac (astrology). This spiritual quest was enhanced by rigorous self-denial and through observance of holy days (i.e., the Jewish Sabbath), seeking visions, and worshiping angels. Whatever the specific form the Colossian heresy took, Jesus was very likely seen as just another teacher of religious principles. In their “philosophy” Jesus was not the Lord over all things, but an enlightened teacher—certainly not the Savior from sin. But then our sin is never a problem in human tradition.

This explains two things we find in the Book of Colossians. The first is Paul’s repeated stress upon the supremacy of Jesus over all things. This is the best apologetic argument to use with those seeking secret invisible powers behind visible things. If Jesus created all things, why look to spirits, angels, invisible forces, or powers—which even if they do exist—must submit to Jesus, their creator? The second fits nicely with what Paul will point out in verse 15, that Jesus, the Lord of all things, “*disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.*” If Jesus is the creator of all things and is even now bringing about a new creation through his work of redemption, what value is there in seeking to learn secret principles, which have been exposed for what they are—mere human opinion.

In verses 9-10, Paul elaborates how this focusing upon finding true spiritual “fulness” in elementary spirits is not “according to Christ.” Paul writes of Jesus, “*for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.*” Yet again Paul speaks of Jesus as God incarnate (taking to himself a true human nature) and the only one in whom true fullness (deity) dwells. You cannot find true fullness in elementary spirits, but only in Jesus—God in the flesh. More than that, all Colossian believers are “in him,” and are filled with the Holy Spirit, so that they are in union with Christ. Jesus is head over all things. This is because Jesus created all things and now sustains them. He—not any elementary spirit—is supreme.

Paul explains how believers come to experience this relationship with Jesus—“in him,” or in “union” with Jesus. Paul connects this union between the believer and Jesus with the outward sign of that union, baptism, which is also the sign of membership in the covenant community (the church). If baptism is the new covenant sign and seal of union with Christ and confirms membership in the covenant, baptism then replaces circumcision which served that same purpose in the old covenant. Paul writes in verses 11-12, “*in him [Jesus] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*” This is an especially important biblical passage for supporting the Reformed practice of baptism of both believing adult converts, as well as the children of believers (infants).

For Paul, baptism as sign and seal of our union with Jesus (being “in him”) which replaces circumcision. This creates a huge problem for our Baptist friends who contend that when the sign and seal of the covenant changes from circumcision (a bloody cutting ritual) to baptism (a water ritual) what is signified (membership in the covenant community) also changes. For Baptists, baptism is one’s public profession of faith—which also holds true for Reformed adult baptisms. But baptism, as was the case with circumcision, also entails membership in the visible church (the covenant). Baptism does something—as the visible sign and seal of our union with Christ. It also includes us in Christ’s body (the church). This was true under the old covenant and in the gospel promise made to Abraham (in Genesis 15 and 17) that the fallen children of Adam would be God’s people made under the covenant of grace—“I will be your God and you will be my people.” If the old and inferior covenant included the children of Israel (some of whom were elect and some not), how could the new and better covenant now exclude the children of believers? A better covenant does not leave out those included under the old—our children.

Paul makes this connection by referring to Jesus, who was circumcised as an infant (on the eighth day) in light of the covenant curse (being cut-off). When Jesus submits to circumcision, God in human flesh, is placing himself under the curse of the covenant, identifying himself with the fallen children of Adam, the true covenant breakers. This is why Paul speaks here of the “circumcision of Christ.” Baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection is the new covenant version of Christ’s circumcision in which he died under that covenant curse attached to circumcision—the cutting of the flesh and the shedding of blood.

Circumcision pointed ahead to what Jesus would accomplish on the cross, bearing the wrath of God in his flesh—that terrible circumcision without hands. This establishes the sacraments of both Testaments as signs and seals of the gospel, namely new life, the forgiveness of sins, and consecration to God as his people—our union with Christ. The Baptist, therefore, must assume the burden of proof by demonstrating that baptism signifies something else, merely one’s testimony to the *presence* of regeneration, and is not a sign of seal of union with Jesus and membership in the covenant community which certainly includes the children of believers. The gospel is clearly revealed in circumcision, since the ritual itself points forward to the covenant mediator bearing the curses of the covenant—the circumcision of Christ as his death upon the cross. Circumcision gives way to baptism, which is sign and seal of the new covenant.

Paul sees the covenant sign and seal of circumcision as fulfilled by the circumcision of Jesus in his death upon the cross in what follows in verses 13-15. *“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”* To begin with, we were dead in sin (trespasses), what Paul calls the uncircumcision of our flesh. This a way of saying we were separate from Christ, his people, and his church. Before the gospel was proclaimed to us, we were unable to do anything to save ourselves until God acted upon us first, by making us alive together with Christ (“with him,” i.e., regeneration). Only then could we come to faith, be justified, and be united to Jesus, of which baptism is both sign and seal.

Because we are united to Christ through faith, and our union to him is signed and sealed in his death and resurrection through our baptism, Paul can say of us that we have been forgiven of our sins (trespasses). This is only possible because God took our guilt (the legal record of our sin—the list of commandments we have broken), and which condemned us (stood against us), and then nailed this record to the cross when Jesus shed his blood. This is but another way of saying Jesus died in our place (the very essence of the substitutionary atonement) to pay the penalty which was due us—the legal demands of the law, which we have broken countless times. In doing this—to save his people from the guilt and power of sin—Jesus disarmed the rulers of this age (those who put Jesus to death—the Romans, who were doing the work of Satan) by triumphing over them in the cross.

Thus Jesus defeats all his enemies and gains the victory over sin, death, and all human traditions for us through his cross and empty tomb. Our application is then to remind ourselves of all the benefits we draw from our union with Christ. Since Jesus is that one in whom the fulness of deity dwells in bodily form, he is the creator of all things—including elemental principles. In dying for his people, Jesus “strips naked” these supposed powers exposing them to be what they are—nothing, like the “wizard” in Oz. In revealing this embarrassing truth to the pagans, Jesus makes their claims a public spectacle—a laughing stock. There are no spiritual forces, powers, or principles. There are no hidden secrets to learn to gain control of the powers. There are no rituals to perform, or pilgrimages to undertake.

The extent of Jesus victory over these things is complete on Easter morning, when Jesus rises again from

the dead. This same Jesus who triumphs over all pretend and wannabe spiritual forces is the same one who made us alive “in him.” We, who were dead in sin are now alive in Christ. We have been granted new birth (regeneration) and now believe the gospel. The list of our trespasses and the guilt of our sins have been nailed to the cross! And now having been united to him through faith (with an unbreakable bond formed by the Holy Spirit), we are baptized into his death and resurrection (that to which circumcision pointed) as the sign and seal of the new live we have been given. And all of this is ours, *because* we are “in him.”