

## **COMPLETED IN CHRIST, COMPLETELY BY CHRIST**

**Col. 2:6-15 (ESV)**

In Colossians 1 Paul has been speaking of ‘the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col. 2:2-3). He continues

**[6] Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord,**

Received here has a special sense of receiving that which has been handed down to you, i.e. the gospel.

**Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.**

**For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 1 Cor. 15:1-4**

Christians are the receivers of the Gospel tradition which has been passed down to us from Christ himself, through the prophets and apostles, kept, preserved and handed down by successive generations of stewards of the mysteries.

**This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. 1 Cor. 4:1-2**

If this treasure has been kept, preserved and handed down to us by trusty stewards, we ought to receive it as one receives a something of supreme value and we ought to treasure it and become rooted, built up, and established in it.

**[6] so walk in him,**

‘Walk’ here is a Greek word *peripateo*, lit. ‘walk around’ or ‘go about’.

**[7] rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.**

It’s great when one of the plants or shrubs in your garden gets established—rooted and built up. And it is even greater when we become ‘rooted and built up in (Christ)’, established in the faith. And just as an established shrub begins to flower and bear fruit, so the established believer abounds in thanksgiving.

The words ‘in him’ are fundamental to Christian faith. As disciples of Christ we follow Christ, are taught by him, and imitate him. But it is more than being with Jesus learning from him and following him (As good as that is!) Through the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit it is being ‘in Christ’. We shall see (in vs 9-12) just how much we are ‘in him’.

But before that, Paul has a warning!

**[8] 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.**

‘See to it’, i.e. watch out, be on the alert. We can easily be taken captive.

The word ‘philosophy’ literally means ‘a love of wisdom’. Philosophy in this context, however, does not refer to great learning, Plato, Socrates, etc. It rather means pieces of so-called wisdom or special knowledge that place one in an elite, higher class. An example of this is the Judaisers who came down to Antioch from Judea and began to teach the Gentile Christians, "Unless you (Gentile Christians) are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1) "Your down here, but you’ve got to be up here, and we’ve got the goods to fix you up".

Human fallenness is crafty and deceptive. It seeks to invent special wisdoms which the inventor has, and which the hearer is said to need if he/she is to be saved or blessed or pleasing to God. The origin of this is religious pride and superiority, and a grasping for power and control over others. Geoffrey Bingham says, ‘Philosophy as human thinking is always open to human error as it seeks to impress’.

What was the philosophy that was taking the Colossian Christians captive?

We can get an indirect description of the problem by looking at Paul’s attack on the heresy. Its basic tenets were:

- It denied that the fullness of God dwelt bodily in Christ (2:9).
- And it denied that the Christian was complete in Christ (verse 10).
- So, it tried to supplement the grace of God in Christ by introducing ways that are deemed necessary to heighten Christian spirituality.

Some of the spiritual supplements, as recorded in Colossians, were:

- circumcision (verses 11-14),
- engaging the help of principalities and powers (verse 15),
- rituals of eating and drinking, observances of new moons, sabbaths, etc. (verses 16-17),
- an attitude of humility and worship towards angels (verse 18), and
- restrictions and abstinence (touch not, taste not, etc.) culminating in a neglect of the body (verses 19-23).

In short, the heretics denied the adequacy of Christ. They were saying that Christians needed more for their salvation than what Jesus Christ had to offer in himself. All of this was based on the idea that it was arrogant to think that, through Christ you could approach God directly and intimately. You needed to climb down a bit, seek the intermediary help of lower angels, and practice certain observances of self-denial.

What would be some modern examples of this phenomenon of special knowledge?

- The idea that Christians need other intermediaries apart from Christ in order to approach God. For example, the blessed virgin Mary, the saints, the priest.

- Unless you speak in tongues you cannot be saved.
- Unless you keep the original Sabbath on the seventh day (i.e. Saturday) you are not pleasing God.
- Unless you are a total abstainer from alcoholic drinks you are sinning and possibly not saved.
- Unless you are baptised by immersion upon confession of faith you are not saved and not a real Christian.
- Unless your dying baby is baptised it will go to hell.

There is good in the doing of some of these things. What is not good is the creating of a philosophy in addition to faith in Christ, the doing of which is necessary to be right with God and to approach God.

This kind of philosophy, says Paul, is according to ‘human tradition’. I.e. stuff made up by humans. It can be religious rituals, washings, regulatory rules for eating and living. At the time of Jesus, Judaism had hundreds of regulations about everything. These things give a religious person the sense of having done something right, according to the regulations, according to the tradition. They can be taken captive by the good feeling of obeying the rules and keeping the tradition, but this, says Paul is all empty deceit.

Human tradition can be what Peter calls ‘the futile ways inherited from your forefathers’ (1 Peter 1 :18).

**...you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.**

In his younger days, before he came to a full faith in Christ, my father followed two philosophies—Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry. You may wish to press me on the question of these philosophies—what do you think about them, are you opposed to them? My answer is: I do not even think of them or consider them, because, as Paul says,

**[9] For in (Christ) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,**

The fullness of deity dwelling bodily, and in a human body—this is the very thing that the heretics say cannot possibly happen. The same denial is made today by the so-called Progressive Christianity heretics. But this scandalous incarnation, the Son of God becoming human flesh, is the bold foundation stone upon which the Christian faith is firmly set.

**[10] and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.**

Paul is urgent to make it clear that all philosophies and human traditions have been outranked, debunked or superseded by the fullness that is ours in Christ. ‘Fullness’ can have the sense of ‘completeness’ and ‘fulfilment’, i.e. not lacking in anything. Paul goes on to explain this fullness in more detail.

[11] In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands...

Paul uses the word 'circumcision' in a metaphorical sense to describe what Christ has done with and for us. But it is a circumcision 'made without hands'. I.e. an action done without human intervention or contribution. This calls to mind a number of passages in Isaiah where God is appalled that there is rampant sin and evil, and no human being to intervene.

Isaiah 59:15-17 (ESV)

**Truth is lacking,  
and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.  
The Lord saw it, and it displeased him  
that there was no justice.  
[16] He saw that there was no man,  
and wondered that there was no one to intercede;  
then his own arm brought him salvation,  
and his righteousness upheld him.**

As Isaiah puts it, he trod the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with him.

Isaiah 63:1-9

**Who is this who comes from Edom,  
in crimsoned garments from Bozrah,  
he who is splendid in his apparel,  
marching in the greatness of his strength?  
"It is I, speaking in righteousness,  
mighty to save."  
[2] Why is your apparel red,  
and your garments like his who treads in the winepress?  
[3] "I have trodden the winepress alone,  
and from the peoples no one was with me;  
I trod them in my anger  
and trampled them in my wrath;  
their lifeblood spattered on my garments,  
and stained all my apparel.  
[4] For the day of vengeance was in my heart,  
and my year of redemption had come.  
[5] I looked, but there was no one to help;  
I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold;  
so my own arm brought me salvation,**

Isaiah 53:6,12

**All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned every one to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.  
...he bore the sin of many,  
and makes intercession for the transgressors.**

Paul continues with the circumcision metaphor. This circumcision 'made without human hands' was done

...by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

What is involved in 'the circumcision of Christ' is much more than the removal of a small piece of flesh, as in the old circumcision; it is the removal of the whole 'body of flesh'. In Ephesians 4:22 Paul speaks of 'putting off the old man' or 'the old adamic humanity'. This 'body of flesh' is the sin nature which has captivated us, body, mind and spirit, like a virus in our computer.

What is required is not a little snip, however sensitive that snip might be. Rather, 'the circumcision of Christ' removes the whole body of sin. We are buried with Jesus in baptism. It was Jesus whole body of flesh that died on the cross and was buried in the tomb, and we were 'crucified with Christ' (Galatians 2:19).

By faith we are to see the union of Christ's 'body of flesh' and our whole sinful nature that inhabits and fills our body of flesh. These two crucified, dead and buried together. So that

**(12) having been buried with him in baptism... you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead'**

Henceforth, then,

**I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:19-20**

**We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin...For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also (by faith in him) must consider (or reckon) yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Romans 6:6-11**

This, then, is the circumcision of Christ.

**[13] 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, [14] by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.**

Our big problem with God was 'the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands'. This record, standing as it did against every human being, meant that spiritually and eternally we were done, dead and dusted.

In this life we live with our sins and failures by suppressing and forgetting them. "Oh! Did I do that! I must have forgotten." But the 'record of debt that (stands) against us' has not been lost just because we are not aware of it.

**And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. Rev. 20:12**

So 'what they had done' was in 'the books'. But the absolutely good news, for us, is that Christ has set this record 'aside, nailing it to the cross'! Like a bill with 'Paid in full' stamped across it and publicly nailed up for all to see.. In so doing

**[15] (God) disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in (Christ).**

Paul does not mean earthly rulers and authorities, but rather ‘the rulers...authorities...the cosmic powers over this present darkness,...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places’ (Ephes. 6:12). These are ‘the elemental spirits of this world’. i.e. The spiritual powers behind the present worldly system with its egotistical, greedy, competitive, accusing and domineering values. But Christ, by his atoning death, merciful resurrection, and dying love, has triumphed over them and morally put them to utter shame.

### **Christ plus**

Everyone who comes to Christ comes with their ‘philosophies’. We are all inclined to believe in Christ, plus our philosophies. Some theologians call this ‘Christ plus...’ Christ plus my ethnicity, Christ plus my family background, Christ plus my cultural tradition, Christ plus my reputation, Christ plus my superior intellect, Christ plus my achievements, Christ plus my material wealth and social status, Christ plus my common sense, Christ plus my worldly wisdom, Christ plus my irrepressible self-confidence.

Paul says, ‘whatever does not proceed from faith is sin’ (Romans 14:23). Whatever is not built on faith in Jesus Christ as my Saviour and my Lord is faith in something else. It is ‘Christ plus...’

Let God’s word speak to you today:

**Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, [7] rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.**

**[8] 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. [9] For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, [10] and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. [11] In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, [12] 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. [13] 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, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. [15] He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Colossians 2:6-15**

As a Christian, you are completed in Christ, completely by Christ. Or, as Paul put it:

**For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Philip. 1:21**

**Rod James**

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