

Christ Is All and All We Need

Our New Testament reading today is from the Apostle Paul's short letter to the Colossians, chapter two, verses 8-15. Paul is countering the false teaching of certain heretics, who claimed that salvation comes through Christ, *plus* belief in angels, in esoteric, mysterious, and secret "wisdom," philosophy, or in a Jewish legalistic tradition, tacked onto faith in Jesus. The apostle says, instead Christ is all and is all we need. Follow as I read:

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

It's a fact that cultic offshoots of mainstream, orthodox Christianity look for converts, not in the ranks of the totally unchurched pagans, but rather among the membership rolls of established Christian churches. My former Baptist denomination supplies more members of the Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter Day Saints than does any other denomination, which is remarkable due to the fact that Baptists claim to be a "people of the Book," who root their members in Bible study and doctrinal preaching.

What seems to be lacking is the understanding and acceptance of what Paul is teaching in our text—that Christ is all and is all we need to be made right with God and receive the free gift of eternal and meaningful life. Paul declares that Christ, God's Son, is superior over all other so-called gods, lords and claims upon our lives. We must beware of the false and aware of the superiority of our Lord Jesus Christ over all other claims that minimize him and that exalt lesser ideologies.

We need to **beware of life principles** that either exclude Christ or keep him from his rightful position of pre-eminence. Philosophy, which means "the love of wisdom," is an honorable discipline. Yet not all philosophies are based on truth. Paul says that any philosophy that excludes Christ is not only inferior, but also is deceived and deceiving (8). Even in Paul's day there were those who borrowed language and terminology from

the true Christian faith, but who were using this hijacked vocabulary to write a completely different narrative and formula for entering God's kingdom.

Paul seems to say that the false teachers who were invading the ranks of the church were kidnappers, or "people stealers," who were snatching away the gullible through false teaching that's attractive by worldly sophistication or by empty promises of worldly success, pleasure and/or acceptance.

Such philosophy is godlessly humanistic and people-centered rather than Christ-centered, which makes it inferior and even false. Any teaching or construct of so-called truth that disregards Christ is bound to end in futility and even despair. Apart from Christ, any system of belief or way of thinking lacks depth, failing to answer the deeper questions of life and eternity. Paul says it's based on the "elemental spirits" of the universe (8). Either it's childishly naïve or it's even demonic, out of hell and from the devil himself. Christ Jesus, God's Son and the Savior of the world, is all we need for present life and eternity life (Phil. 1:21).

Christ is all we need to detect and determine the **practices of empty religion** (9-12). As has been said, people are "incurably religious," and will adopt or formulate some frame of reference for what they perceive to be truth. Even the local Freedom from Religion group has their own form of religion, call it secularism, godless humanism, universalism, or nihilism. Even those who, in response to religious surveys, check the "none of the above" box, hold to something they believe to be true, even if it's the rejection of all established beliefs or religious systems. There are also those who identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious," who are supposedly finding their own way to spiritual reality and truth but are unwilling to commit themselves to a specific faith or be accountable to a religious community with some requirements. They want no strings attached and desire to be obligation free.

In Paul's day, in first century Colossae and Laodicea, there was a movement of angelology, with belief in spirit beings, like channels today, that emanate from "god," whoever he might be. The more privileged received more emanations, such as bigger, better and more powerful angels.

Astrology was big, such as for Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. No doubt they read astral charts and horoscopes in their current publications. This mindset has its heirs today with an obsession with Ouija boards, crystals and other media inspired by the kingdom of darkness.

Today, of course, we're aware of the cultural and religious diversity in our nation and particularly in our city, and as followers of Christ we must respect other religions. Although we're not to demean other religions or question the sincerity of their adherents, yet it's quite OK to accept the claims of Christ to be the unique Son of God

and the exclusive way to know God as Father (John 14:6). But we can be expected to be labeled as narrow-minded, as was my dear old daddy.

My father, who was a true old-time Baptist preacher, while serving as pastor in a Kentucky community, was confronted in the post office by a lady who had visited First Baptist and had heard him preach a typical evangelistic sermon about eternal life through faith in Christ alone. She introduced herself, and began to engage him in a conversation that went something like this: "Pastor Roberts, you said that only followers of Christ will be in heaven and not adherents of other religions and cults. But you and I both came to the post office, but from different directions. I came from the West Side of Danville on another street, and you came from your house on the East Side, down Lexington Avenue, and here we are, both at the post office. We came different ways but both arrived in the same place. "That's correct," replied my father. "But when I die, I don't want to go to the post office."

We need to be open to all people and gracious and respectful of their diversity, but without faith in Christ and belief in the truth of our gospel, we have nothing to offer. Christ is to be preeminent over the religious realm, including our orthodox, biblical faith. Paul addresses how the Old Covenant ritual of circumcision, which was intended as a sign of the covenant of God's faithful people, had become a legalistic requirement, even of Christ's followers, imposed by a group known as Judaisers. And today we have our legalists, who would impose baptism and other church rites as necessary for salvation. Baptism and circumcision are signs of a deeper, spiritual significance and reality, which is a change of heart and the beginning of a whole new life in Christ.

We need to beware, says Paul, of any individual or church that says we need Christ plus anything or anyone else for eternal life. Christ plus zero gives eternal life, the forgiveness of sin and an everlasting relationship with God. Following Christ and obeying his word and will is all we need, and we have no right to impose any additional requirements. In fact, Paul had some harsh words for those who added human and religious requirements to the saving, free grace we receive through faith in Christ (Gal.1:6-9). This means we're to be very lenient and tolerant toward those who might practice their Christian faith in a different way, such as their day of worship or their church liturgy or lack thereof (16-23).

Heretics would say that we need Christ plus their teachings, their rituals, rules and regulations, but Paul says "No! All we need is Christ, because when we have Christ we have all the fullness of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (9). Because we have Christ in us, we have access to God's wisdom. "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16).

Our Scripture tells us we must beware of **the power of sin and evil** (13-15). These other principles, philosophies, religions and new age forces cannot help us because apart from Christ we are spiritually dead apart from him and helpless in our struggle against spiritual forces in this fallen world, including our own sinful, fallen nature (Eph.2:1ff; 6:10ff). Even if we could exercise our best effort at behavioral and moral reform, we would remain in our guilt before our perfectly holy God. He demands our holiness, which is humanly impossible and something only he can give us.

Paul addresses a congregation of new believers, who easily could adhere to the truths about Christ and yet remain under the dominion of the world, the flesh and the devil. It's not by agreeing to the truths about Christ that makes us God's being-redeemed people, but it's through a vital trust and love relationship with Christ himself. Tragically, many so-called Christians in our world are members of churches but are held captive by the values and loyalties of the fallen culture, such as greedy materialism and a political system that promises more prosperity but at the expense of the poor and victims of racism and injustice. We can pretend to worship Christ, but in fact are captive to the principalities and powers of the fallen world.

Paul gives us a vivid word picture: With our own handwriting we wrote a big "I O U," an admission of guilt and our debt to God. But through the blood of Jesus, God erased our self-indictment and "I O U." The ink on first century parchment was easily washed away. So God has erased our sin and guilt and made the slate clean. We are made whole and complete in Christ, who in his death nailed our sin and our condemnation for sin to the cross. No longer can the law be used against us. God nailed our sin debt to the cross (14).

One scholar (RC Sproul) says our text can be viewed as our standing together in a large room with Christ, who visits each one of us. Maybe there stands Alice, who stands in shame from her recent adultery. Jesus writes on a slip of paper, "Alice's adultery," and pins the tag on Alice. To Charles, he attaches a tag that says "Charles' embezzlement and theft." To another, Jesus attaches a tag that says "Murder, and the destruction of another's reputation." But after that is done, and everyone wears a shameful tag identifying their particularly egregious sin, Christ returns to each one, takes their tags and pins them on himself, and then goes to his cross to suffer the death penalty for all of these sins.

Christ is all we need because he not only has freed us from our guilt, but gives us new life. He's all we need as our guide and also as our provider of abundant, full and meaningful life (Jn. 10:10). Just as Jeremiah lamented the foolishness of the people who forsook God as the Fountain of Living Water for their home built, leaky cisterns, so Paul derides our foolishness for not living in the fullness of life that is ours through faith in Christ and walking in love with him.

When my daughter, Stephanie, was a little girl, we took her and her brother to a petting zoo where children could feed the farm animals. We bought a small bottle of milk which was intended to be given to the pigs that came up to the fence to be fed. Stephanie enjoyed the pig who voraciously drank milk from her bottle. Seeing how much the pig enjoyed the milk, Stephanie decided she would enjoy it too, so she took the bottle from the pig's mouth and began drinking from the bottle herself.

Paul notes the foolishness of taking the unclean and the unhealthy that's being dispensed from false teachers, and calls for them to partake of Christ, and to settle for nothing less than the life, truth and the provisions he offers us, "pure, spiritual milk" (1 Pet. 2:2).

A final picture Paul gives is of a Roman general's victory parade. After a battle conquest, the general leads his troops, who have tethered to ropes behind them the enemy troops they had defeated in battle (15). Christ has won the victory for us and he'll lead us in a triumphal procession, leaving behind us the defeated powers of sin and self-centeredness and whatever robbed us of peace, rest and a useful, joyful life.

What Paul calls us to is the freedom that Christ has won for us on the cross, and the life he has made possible for us all. As I've counseled many people who are heartbroken and desperate following the abandonment of a spouse, the truth is, God is all we need. Christ is all we really need. If you're reduced to him alone, you already have all you need. And he can and will bring other people, relationships, experiences and provisions you will need as you continue to follow him in the new life and beginning he alone can give.

I've sat in my pastor's study in previous pastorates and have sought to encourage those whose marriages had fallen apart, exhorting them to realize that even though they had lost their relationship with their spouse, Christ was really enough for them. But I'm afraid I didn't go quite far enough with them. I should have reminded them that, yes, Christ is enough, but that also they can access Christ's presence, grace and sufficiency through his body, the church. Christ's body is with us, in all his sufficiency, as we find loving, caring, and trustworthy relationships through his body on earth—the church. That means that you and I have a calling to reach out to those in need of Christ's love, caring, presence and friendship. You and I have a role to play in Christ's being enough for someone who desperately needs him. Then we can say...

Christ is all and is all we need.