

Engage

Thursday 17 December 2020

Complete in Christ

Colossians 2:8-3:4

BEFORE MEETING TOGETHER

If you haven't already done so, watch the Bible Project video: Colossians, an Overview
<https://youtu.be/pXTXIDxQsvc>

In Galatia, Jewish zealots had likely told the new converts that in becoming Christians they had only got half of what they needed. What they now ought to do, to complete the experience, was to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses. Paul spent the whole of his letter to the Galatians arguing that this was a complete misunderstanding, and that to go this route would land the young Christians in real trouble. They would be buying into a system which wouldn't do them any more good than the paganism they had just left behind.

Colossae wasn't that far from Galatia, and now Paul is anxious that similar people would come to the little church there with the same dangerous message. Most towns or districts had a synagogue and at least a small Jewish community. Don't get drawn into it, he says. It will be a form of captivity for you.

OPEN

How do you go about deciding what's true or not?

STUDY

Read Colossians 2:8-3:4.

Paul begins this part of his letter with one of the most important points in all of Christianity from that day to this. Jesus, he says, was and is not simply a fully human being (though he is) and not simply a man remarkably full of God (though he's that as well). He isn't a demigod, half divine and half human. He is both fully human and fully divine (9-10).

Whatever new idea someone comes up with, Paul says, this is the acid test: Is it "according to Christ" (8)? Does it have Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord, as its centre and focus? If not, beware.

What practical steps can a Christian take to take care not be captured by false ideas?

In circumcision, 'putting off' a small piece of human flesh is trivial by comparison to 'putting off' an entire way of life, an entire sphere of existence. This we did when we were baptized, Paul says, the mode and sign of entry into the Christian community from the earliest days to the present. In the last study we considered ways people believe Christ is not central. Here Paul argues against those who say that while Christ is perfectly fine, we just need to add some other bit to make our spiritual life truly complete.

What ideas or practices have you encountered that suggest we need to add something to our faith besides Jesus to make us "true" or "total" Christians?

How would Paul argue against those who suggest such things?

The 'record that was against us' (14) refers to the Jewish law which prevented Gentiles like the Colossians from getting into God's people and condemned Jews for breaking its commands.

How has God dealt with the condemnation of the law?

For the Romans every crucifixion of a rebel king, even a strange one like Jesus, was another symbolic triumph for Rome, and hence, in Jewish eyes, for the power of paganism as a whole. How strange 14-15 must have sounded. On the cross, Paul declares, God was celebrating his triumph over the principalities and powers, the very powers that thought it was the other way around. Paul never gets tired of telling of the glorious paradox of the cross: God's weakness overcoming human strength, God's folly overcoming human wisdom.

Therefore, how in 16-19 does Paul say we should respond when people try to entice us with particular styles of piety or devotion other than single-minded devotion to Jesus?

When Paul mentions observing certain religious days or the regulations, 'don't handle, don't taste, don't touch' certain things (16, 21), he is focusing attention on the appeal to pagans of Judaism's high moral code and heavy demands, a kind of religious fundamentalism.

Why does religious fundamentalism in today's world have such appeal to different people around the globe?

Often when people are sick and tired of the murky, immoral world, they are glad to embrace a way of life which offers clear, bright, clean lines. Why, according to Paul, may these "give an appearance of wisdom" (23) but not actually be wise?

In 20-23, why does Paul characterize this 'fundamentalist' behaviour as worldly?

By contrast, what characterizes the life of the spiritual person (3:1-4)?

We who died with the Messiah don't belong to the old world any more. The regulations that are relevant there aren't relevant for us. We who were raised with the Messiah possess a true life in God's new world, the upper or heavenly world. That's where the real "me" is now to be found, 'hidden with Christ, in God' (3).

Paul contrasts rules and regulations about what will disappear (2:22) with being 'raised to life with Christ' which 'will be revealed with him in glory' (3:4).

How is this contrast a helpful guide to discerning ways to live a holy life?

PRAY

Celebrate the completeness you have in Christ, who is God in all his fullness. Pray for discernment to recognize false teachers who try to impose a need for anything in addition to Christ. Thank God that your life is safe in him. Pray that you will live daily with your focus on things that are above so that you will have a sure guide to how to live here and now.¹

NEXT TIME

Old Clothes, New Clothes: Colossians 3:5-17

¹ Tom Wright, Dale Larsen, and Sandy Larsen, [Colossians & Philemon: 8 Studies for Individuals or Groups](#), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London: SPCK, 2009), 31-35.