

Colossians 2:6-10 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.

Colossians 2:6-10 | Continue as You Began

A couple of weeks ago I did the wedding for Ian and Zana who many of you know. If you don't you should get to know them. I was talking a bit with Zana's father who is a missionary in Greece and we were discussing what it looks like to engage with the gospel as a protestant in a culture dominated by an orthodox nominalism. In that environment it is typical to think of yourself as part of the church even if you never go, and to think you understand the gospel even if you don't. Their religion is co-extant with a national identity, more akin to patriotism than faith. Underneath the garb lies a similar secular ethic to the rest of Western Europe and the United States.

Then I was sharing about Denver, our challenges are different. Rather than a nominal religiosity forming our cultural backdrop, ours is an explicit secularism. Christianity is not on the radar whatsoever and if it is on the radar it is thought of in primarily political terms as an obstacle to be overcome for the sake of expanding freedom and protecting human rights. Or if a secular person happens to have a Christian friend it is likely considered, and perhaps even described in a more therapeutic sense, in service of our cultures last shared good, health.¹

But what we both have in common is this same thing that Paul is addressing, a background culture which has the capacity and intention of deceiving Christians into walking away from their faith. This is Paul's initial concern for the maturity of the Colossians, that they remain in Christ and are not taken in by the culture around them. 2000 years later the concerns have not changed. Today I want to join Paul in making a pastoral investment in your Spiritual health amidst a highly contagious culture. The first is offensive, the second is defensive.

1. Offense

Colossians 2:6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,

We finally meet the first truly heavy duty Pauline "therefore." Paul in his letters will place these *therefore's* at the end of chapters of argument on which he hangs all that he has previously written like a trad climber suspending himself from this tiny anchor. So let us

¹I'm so suspicious of health language. Not health itself which of course is real, but of health language. It seems like an abused metaphor in our culture used to justify all sorts of harm.

remember all that came before which hangs off of this therefore. His praise for the faith of the Colossians, his prayer for their maturity which dovetails into his praise for who Christ is, then what Christ has done for the Colossians, and finally how Paul has shared in Christ's sufferings for the sake of the Colossians. Now a therefore. In light of all of this, supported by all of this what ought you to do?

As you received Christ Jesus, so walk in him. The language of received here is different from how we typically use that word in evangelical culture as receiving Christ Jesus into your heart. It is more akin to the generational passing down. Christ gave this message to Paul, who gave this message to Epaphras who gave this message to the Colossians. This Christ who they received is also the pattern for how they are to walk. Christ is not just the door, he is also the way. This is the the central point of Paul's exhortation, don't forget or abandon Christ Jesus the Lord. Let's put some more meat on those bones.

Colossians 2:7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Rooted is perfect tense which means a past action which effects the present, the rest is present tense which means they are continuous actions. This mixture of metaphors shows the manner in which we relate to Christ in our lives. He is the root of who we are, the one which provides our structure and nourishment. We are also built up and grow in him, we are more and more being established in our faith in him, the one whom we were taught about. And we are abounding in thanksgiving. This is the wonder of knowing Christ it is foundational and ever growing and this causes us to abound in thanksgiving.

I just heard a wonderful distinction that I'd like to share between wonder and curiosity. Curiosity is not an eternal value but wonder is. Consider this, you wouldn't want to feel curious indefinitely. Imagine reading a mystery novel, you're curious and its fun and then it ends and your still the same amount of curious, that is not fun. But wonder is not the type of thing that is satisfied. Wonder can be fulfilled and lead to more wonder! Like the James Webb pointed into deep space the more we see the further we look.

Rooted in Christ, established in the faith, built up in him, we are spurred to be abounding in thanksgiving. The more gratitude the more gratitude, the more we know of Christ the more we want to know of Christ. Our gratitude will never be satisfied, it will abound like wonder. This offense is the best defense.

2. Don't Be Swindled

Colossians 2:8 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.

This next exhortation is a call for an active defense. Now we must remember that Paul is writing to a particular church at a particular time in history. That means he is addressing the issues that he understands them to be facing. There has been a lot of ink spilled seeking to diagnose the particular cultural pitfalls that the Colossians were susceptible to. Some purport gnosticism, but it's likely too early for that. Or the local deities of the Roman mystery religions. Or a move back into Judaism. Or perhaps a mixture of the last two. I read multiple good arguments, but I'm not comfortable making a clear diagnosis. It could be any of these in varying proportions.

I think Paul's ambiguity here is actually capturing what is a certain dynamic for any mode of being, worldview, epistemic perspective which positions itself as an alternative to Christ. Of course, the preacher says we need to keep Christ at the center. Stick with me, Paul is saying something way more fundamental than that. All perspectives on life, be they philosophies, religions, human traditions, elemental spirits or principles, are all captivity if they are not according to Christ. They trap you and prevent you from participating in reality because they neglect the center of reality itself which is Christ.

I'll give you a current picture of this in our culture. Modernism and Post-modernism. Much of the culture war is actually symptomatic of the deconstructing of our general philosophy in the west for the past 400 years by the post-modernist movement.² So let's engage with these reigning philosophies. Modernism began with a quest for absolute certainty by attempting to remove as much as possible the subjective or irrational in man. So Descartes famously sat alone in his chair and doubted all of which he could not be absolutely certain. He couldn't doubt his own doubting. Doubting = Thinking. Cogito Ergo Sum.

Now this modernist attempt at certainty was fueled by a desire to see reality as it is and to speak and relate truthfully to it. And it was wildly effective, when you say certain, you mean what Descartes was describing. In Christian circles when you hear a defense of "absolute truth" they are usually defending a Modernist vision of certainty. But in this desire to see the world as it is and to be objectively certain of what we see, the seeds for post-modernism were already sewn. Descartes made the individual disembodied pure reason of man the arbiter of truth. Now in our post-modern culture we witness an anti-realist subjective interpreter as the arbiter of truth.

Trans rights are fundamentally about the subjective interpretation of an individual, as is the personhood of a child in the womb. To which the right says, "facts don't care about your feelings" (modernism). And the left says, "you can't understand my facts because you can't understand my lived experience" (post-modernism).

² Although there are people who self-consciously refer to themselves as post-moderns, I think that post-modernism should not be thought of as a separate agent which comes to attack the modern, but rather as the inevitable conclusion to the modernist project. Our quest for certainty attained through human objectivity has deteriorated into an absolute uncertainty. But you know what they say, boys will be girls.

Both of these human traditions, these empty and deceitful philosophies neglect this most fundamental aspect of reality. God made it and we are not God. Humans no matter how objective we try to be, nor how subjective we might pretend reality is, are not the arbiters of the truth. So don't be deceived, or tricked into trusting yourself, or find yourself settling in your desire for certainty. Instead of these you must consider the whole of your life according to Christ. Paul goes on to explain why.

3. Remember you have the Real thing

Colossians 2:9-10 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.

Paul supports his argument by showing us these two couplets that are so extreme as to almost be paradoxical. The first is that in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. Consider what relevance this has to Paul's argument and exhortation that all philosophy outside of Christ is deceptive and captive making. I'll put it this way by quoting Esther Meek: *"The most important fact about reality is that God is the Covenant Lord, the Covenant Head."*

Now let's flesh this out a bit more, God is God and we are not. God is absolute and we are not. But God makes himself Covenant Lord. A Covenant is a system of rules or structures which pattern a relationship. The most fundamental description of this in scripture is of course, I will be your God and you will be my people. And this God who is absolute and in that sense completely unlike us and perhaps unknowable to a creature like us, makes himself present by dwelling bodily with us. He who is the absolute arbiter of truth itself makes himself a fact which we can know. The fullness of deity dwells bodily. The totally transcendent is imminent.

Next: you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

Again we see the total immanence of God, who makes himself known to us so personally that Paul describes us as having been filled in him. It's twisted language meant to break our imaginations. We get covered in, or filled with, but Paul says filled in. He is so complete that our being in him fills us! And this one is the head of all rule and authority the one who truly owns the truth, and the powers of the world.

He is a denial of the objectivity of Descartes by revealing the only true absolute as a person not a proposition. And a denial of our own subjective relativism by his absolute revelation of himself. Do not be deceived, Christ is the Lord.