

Works Cited

Dunn, James D.G. The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996.

PEALED AWAY

COLOSSIANS 2:6-15

Catching up on the Story

Paul has just finished up addressing the claims that have been competing for the Colossians' attention. In a Christological hymn, Paul argues that salvation and lordship belong solely to Christ. No other being, spiritual, angelic, or otherwise, should be served or provides any access to or reconciliation with God the Father. Christ is the only way. Paul's main concern seems to be helping the Colossians not be taken advantage of by any new strain of thought leading the Colossians away from Christ. Even though Paul is not with them in person, he longs for them to continue on the path they started.

Paul is moving from his statements regarding the centrality of Christ to the Christian life to how Christ's death is effective. Paul uses a mash-up of several metaphors to describe the importance and value of Christ's death. "The force of the sequence of images of what happened on the cross is power: a spiritual circumcision achieved and body of flesh stripped off, a burial with Christ and resurrection with Christ, being made alive with Christ from a state of death, and a wiping out of the record of transgression and destruction of that record. But the final one is boldest of all: a stripping off of the rulers and authorities as discarded rags, putting them to public shame and triumphing over them in him. This is a piece of theological audacity" (Dunn, 169-70).

Some Context

Paul continues to battle the "philosophy" that has snuck into the Colossian church. He has already clearly stated the nature of Christ as the firstborn of creation, the one in whom everything was created and in whom all creation is held together. The supremacy of Christ is not to be doubted. However, it seems that Paul is not confronting a doctrinal issue as he is tackling practical matters. Paul moves on to face these practical issues, which can be found in 2:16-23, by making specific doctrinal statements in the form of metaphor.

In short order, Paul will offer up at least five metaphors that will help the Colossians understand the fullness of life that can be found only in Christ through his death and resurrection. This section begins with verse 6 of chapter 2, reminding the Colossians that they are to continue on the path

they started. The Colossians have received Christ as their Lord, and their lives are to continue to be led “in him” with their foundation fixed and established in faith in Christ. This is an appeal to do as they were first taught.

The Elemental Spirits of the Universe

Before Paul gets to the metaphors which will dominate verses 11-15, Paul takes a moment to define the problem more clearly. Paul’s statement in verse 8 is an exhortation that calls the Colossians to make sure that no one performs intellectual banditry and carries the Colossians’ minds off by way of “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, not according to Christ.”

A note needs to be said here about the meaning of “philosophy.” A person of great logical skill, Paul is not warning against all forms of reason. Paul warns against those who would use smooth talk and reason to turn the Colossians away from the true path they started. Furthermore, the phrase “philosophy and empty deceit” belong together. Paul may have intentionally left things ambiguous so that their challenge could cover a broader range of possible alternatives to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the end, Paul is warning about those trains of thought rooted in human tradition and wisdom and not in Christ.

Another tricky phrase that Paul uses is “the elemental spirits of the universe,” which is probably better translated as “the elemental forces of the world.” There is no consensus on what this phrase means. It could mean the worship of angels, among other things. Regardless, these “elemental forces of the world” have no proper place in the life and practice of the Colossian church.

Paul argues that we live according to Christ and his teachings, not these so-called human traditions, because in Christ, “the whole fullness of the deity dwells bodily.” The person of Christ is the exact representation of God the Father. “As the human soma [body] is what enables a person to be in relationship with other persons, so the somatic character of this indwelling meant that God could be encountered directly in and through this particular human being, Christ” (Dunn, 152).

Paul goes on to say that as Christ’s fullness is found in the Father, so is our fullness found in Christ that cannot be attained anywhere else. Fullness has the sense of completeness, being what we were/are intended to be. Once again, Paul declares that Christ is the head (the most important part, the part that rules) of all rulers and authorities. “The implication, therefore, is that in receiving the tradition of Jesus as

8. A popular atonement theory (a theory about how Jesus’ death brings about salvation for creation) maintains that we owed a great debt of sin and that Jesus paid the debt for us. That’s not the image evoked here. Instead, Paul says that Jesus erased those trespasses rather than paying the debt for them. Is this a significant difference? If so, why? If not, why?

9. In verse 15, Paul states that Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.” What rulers and authorities is Paul talking about? How does Jesus disarm them, making it a public example of them?

10. In light of this passage, what might God be calling us to do?

So What...?

All in all, Paul has recounted for the Colossians the power and purpose of the cross. It is abundantly clear that we participate with Christ in his death and resurrection if we align ourselves with him. God has circumcised us –our sinful nature has been stripped off, we have been buried with Christ, fully identifying with his death to self and selfish desire, we have been/will be raised entirely from the dead, given new life even though we were dead, the record of our transgressions and our debts have been erased, wiped away, destroyed by the death of Christ, and finally, all of the things that have kept us down from the beginning of time have been removed from covering us and have been discarded like a bunch of old rags.

These statements are a powerful reminder of what God seeks to accomplish in us and our world. It’s clear that if we remain faithful to having Christ as the head, we will triumph and have the fullness of life in Christ, participating with him in his death and resurrection. There is no other way for victory to be had.

“philosophy” (verse 8)?

3. What are the “elemental spirits of the universe” (verse 8)?

4. In verse 10, what does the phrase “and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority?” What kind of connection might there be between Paul’s confession regarding the Colossians and his warning in verse 8?

5. What does it mean to be spiritually circumcised (verse 11)?

6. In verse 12, Paul begins to talk about baptism. What does Paul insist happens in our baptism? What kind of connection between the circumcision metaphor and baptism?

7. Paul says that God erased the record of our trespasses along with the legal demands that went along with those trespasses (verse 13-14). What trespasses is Paul talking about? What are the legal demands?

Christ and Lord and believing in(to) him (2:5-7), the Colossian Christians already had all that is necessary for fullness of life, unrestricted access to the divine power which will shape them, too, into the divine image (3:10)” (Dunn, 153).

In verse 11, Paul dives into a redundant stream of metaphors that help us understand the power of the cross. Dunn states, “In short, 2:11-15 were probably intended as an elaborate attempt to describe the importance of what Christ accomplished on the cross and in his resurrection by means of a sequence of vivid metaphors (circumcision, burial and resurrection, death and giving life, forgiveness and cancellation of legal bond, public triumph)” (Dunn, 154).

Metaphor #1

Circumcision – Since the time of Abraham, God’s people have been practicing circumcision as a rite of membership and inclusion in the nation of Israel. Males born into God’s people were circumcised, and anyone who wished to convert to Judaism also needed to be circumcised. Using familiar Jewish imagery, Paul describes what happened in Christ’s death. Circumcision, which represents a physical act, links to what happens to Christ during his crucifixion and subsequently what happens to us as those who are “in him.” The NRSV reads, “Circumcised with a spiritual circumcision.” A better reading is probably “circumcised with a circumcision not done with human hands.”

Dunn believes that this first metaphor conveys the imagery that “It was not simply “his” flesh that Christ stripped off, but the flesh of the first Adam (cf. Rom. 8:3), representing “all things” in their domination by the powers, this being necessary before he could assume his Adamic reign over “all things” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:27, 45, 50). A cosmic circumcision of human flesh was a necessary preliminary to cosmic rule” (Dunn, 158). In other words, we were circumcised, not physically, with Christ in his death, but spiritually. All sin and evil powers that have oppressed humanity since the fall was stripped off Christ through his death and resurrection. Consequently, those who are “in him” are circumcised with him. Our sinful nature, which has clothed us for a long time, has now been stripped away. This will become important later in chapter 3 when Paul describes how we now must be dressed.

Metaphor #2

Buried/Baptized – As with the first metaphor, the terms “in him/with him” are present and denote the sharedness of Christ’s death with our lives. The circumcision of the first metaphor is said to have happened “when you were buried with him in baptism.” Baptism is another standard image and rite for Christians. While Paul’s baptismal theology

may not be fully developed here in the letter to the Colossians, we can understand a few things. First, baptism becomes a metaphor for death and resurrection. Being buried is seen as the final step of death. Death is completed when one is buried. So, Christ's death and burial is now something those of us who are "in him" participate in through our baptism. Following someone to death shows the highest level of commitment to that person. "Since burial was understood as the conclusion of the event of dying, this commitment meant the enacted willingness to identify oneself with the complete event of Jesus' death. The passive tense indicates also the yielding of those being baptized to the baptizer as indicative of their surrender to God. Here again the initial focus is on the event of conversion-initiation, but also in view is the effectiveness of what Christ's death accomplished. It is because his death was a kind of circumcision of old humanity, that such an identification with it engages its spiritual energy in effective operation in believers' lives, both individually and corporately" (Dunn, 159).

Christ's death didn't happen to us, but we participate in Christ's death through our baptism. Consequently, in baptism, we are raised to a new life as we emerge from the baptismal waters. Paul is saying that we were buried with Christ, but through the power of God, we were raised from the dead with Christ.

Metaphor #3

Death to Life – This metaphor is an extension of the previous one. Themes of death to life are already present in being buried and baptized. However, Paul claims that we were already dead when we were living in our uncircumcised flesh. In all likelihood, this metaphor is explicitly aimed at the gentile Christians. To a certain extent, Jews were "alive" because they participated in the covenant. The force of the metaphor is clear, though; we were dead in our transgressions which were a result of being clothed in our uncircumcised flesh. But through Christ's death, we have been forgiven and made alive "with him."

Metaphor #4

Cancellation of Legal Debt/Bond – This metaphor is significantly different from the previous three as Paul now draws from the legal world. Much like today, when a loan is issued, or someone is commanded to pay restitution, there is a paper trail that keeps each transaction count. A piece of paper would be issued that recounted what was owed and to whom. Paul states that Christ's death has erased the record of wrongs and debts that stood against us with the full force of the law. The wrongs we have committed and the debt we owe has been destroyed in Christ's death.

It's important to note here that the image is not of Christ paying the debt, but that the record and the debts were destroyed, done away with through Christ's death. "The thought is rather of the indictment which was itself nailed to the cross in execution. The play, then, is rather with the thought of Christ as himself the condemnatory bond and his death as its destruction. The metaphor is convoluted, but presumably reflect again the idea of Christ's death as a sin offering and thus of Christ as embodying the sins of the offerer and destroying them in his death. Once again we should just note that it is not the law which is thought of as thus destroyed, but rather its particular condemnation of transgression, absorbed in the sacrificial death of Christ" (Dunn, 166).

Metaphor #5

Disarmed Rulers and Authorities – In another metaphor, Paul states the Christ's death has disarmed all of the rulers and authorities, that which is seen and unseen, exposing them for what they are stealers of life, shaming them publicly and triumphing over them. This metaphor is a reversal of the imagery of the preceding verse. From the cross as a symbol of destruction, the thought is transformed into the image of public triumph. Here what is translated as "disarmed" could better be translated as "stripped off." "The spiritual powers spoken of there (1:16) could be likened to a kind of garment draped over the cosmos, lying upon it and dominating it...For the Colossians at any rate the point would be clear; the spiritual powers, including the elemental forces (2:8) should be counted as of no greater value and significance than a bunch of old rags" (Dunn, 167-68).

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. In verses 6-7, Paul encourages his friends to continue living their lives in Jesus, being rooted and built up in him. The verse ends with the phrase, "abounding in thanksgiving." What kind of connection might there be between remaining rooted and established in faith and living a life of thanksgiving?
2. Paul's got a great mind and makes good use of it as he writes to the churches. What is he warning about when he warns against