

# Colossians 2

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*“The greatest danger regarding cults ... is complacency—considering ourselves and our children to be immune from their attraction. If Christ is not the center of a Christian’s life, that Christian is ripe for another spirit....”*

Paul Fox

## In a Nutshell

*In chapter 2, Paul tells the Colossian believers: Faithful friends in Colosse, I want you to know that even though I am concerned about you I am delighted to know that you are still standing firm in your faith in Jesus. You received Christ as Lord, now continue the process of growing up in him. Don't allow anyone to deceive you with fancy talk that promises much and delivers nothing.*

*Remember that fullness is found only in Christ, and you participate in that fullness. You have complete salvation and complete freedom in him, so don't allow yourselves to be intimidated into thinking that genuine*

*spirituality is found in keeping rules, having experiences, or denying yourselves. All those things foster pride and have no value in keeping the flesh in check.*

# The Truth about Christ and Christians

## I. Introduction

### Don't Look for Treasure You Already Have

In his book *Souls on Fire*, Elie Weissel tells a remarkable tale. In far away Krakau, in days when sleep was often disturbed by dreams, there lived one Isaac, son of Yechel. Isaac was a poor man whose family seldom ate their fill. One night in a vivid dream, he saw the distant city of Prague. He saw a river flowing through the city, and under a particular bridge he saw a buried treasure. When he woke the next morning, the dream had not faded. Its clear and vivid images remained etched on his mind. That night the dream returned. And the next night. Every night for two weeks, Isaac had the same dream in which he saw the city of Prague, the river, the bridge, and the buried treasure hidden beneath the bridge.

Finally, he decided to walk all the way to Prague to see for himself if the dream might be real. After several days he arrived in the city. Even though he had never been there, he recognized it and knew it well from his dreams. He found the bridge, went under it to search for the treasure, and then suddenly was grabbed firmly at the back of his neck by a soldier who dragged him away to prison for interrogation.

The soldier sat him in a chair and said, "All right, Jew, what were you doing prowling around under that bridge?" Not knowing what else to say, Isaac decided to tell the truth, "I had a dream that there was buried treasure under that bridge, and I was looking for it."

Immediately, the soldier burst into mocking laughter, "You stupid Jew, don't you know that you can't believe what you see in your dreams? Why, for the last two weeks I myself have had a dream every night that far away in the city of Krakau, in the house of some Jew by the name of Isaac, son of Yechel, there is a treasure buried beneath the sink in his house. Wouldn't it be the most idiotic of actions if I were to go all the way to Krakau to look for some Jew that doesn't exist. Or there may be a thousand Isaacs, son of Yechel. I could waste a lifetime looking for a treasure that isn't there." With uproarious laughter, the soldier stood him up, opened the door, gave him a good kick, and let him go.

Naturally, Isaac, son of Yechel, walked back to Krakau, back to his own house, where he looked beneath the sink in his own kitchen, found the treasure buried there, and lived to a ripe old age as a rich man. The treasure was at home all along.

This truth applies to Christians as well: our treasure is in Jesus Christ, who resides in us. We don't have to look anywhere else. Paul wrote to the Colossians because false teachers were telling them that Jesus Christ was not sufficient; they needed some additional spiritual experiences. They taught that Jesus himself was inadequate and this inadequate Jesus couldn't provide all they needed for a full spiritual experience.

Paul countered this claim by telling the Colossian believers, as well as their modern counterparts, that Jesus is the fullness of God and that because of their relationship with him, they have been given fullness. The treasure is Christ, who is in them. Paul tells them in this chapter not to look for other treasure when the true treasure is already theirs.

## II. Commentary

### The Truth about Christ and Christians

**Main Idea:** *Knowing the truth that fullness, forgiveness, and freedom are found in Jesus strengthens believers against attractive but empty deception.*

#### A. Our Absolute Fullness in Christ (vv. 1–10)

**Supporting Idea:** *Jesus is fully God, and we are given fullness in him.*

**2:1.** Paul feared the Colossian believers would allow themselves to be caught in a web of deception cleverly spun by people promoting false doctrine. **Struggling** reveals the nature of Paul’s concern. The Greek word means “anxiety or concern.” Paul is not struggling because he is in prison. His struggle is not external; his is an intense inner struggle on behalf of believers in Colosse, **Laodicea, and for all who have not met [him] personally** (possibly a reference to believers in Hierapolis, or Colosse).

Paul had his eyes open to the presence and the appeal of false teaching. He was concerned that the Colossians not have theirs closed. Like Paul we need to have a wide-eyed awareness of the appeal of error. We have no excuse for having our eyes closed to the existence of error, because the Bible is full of warnings (Rom. 16:17–18; Gal. 1:6–9; Acts 20:28–31; 1 Tim. 1:3–7; 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 4:3–4; 1 John 4:1).

**2:2–4.** Paul tells how to avoid being deceived. These verses contain three elements which add up to a loving, learning community. Paul’s goal is that believers be (1) **encouraged in heart** which happens as they are (2) **united in love**, (3) and as they are settled in their **understanding** of the truth.

**Encouraged** can either mean “comfort, cheer up” or “encourage, strengthen.” Within the context of this letter, the idea of strengthen fits best, since there is no hint of sadness or distress for which the Colossians need comfort. They need strength to equip them to stand strong against the error they face.

Strengthening takes place as believers are **united in love**. United in love translates a Greek participle and could be rendered “by being united in love” (nasb) rather than “and united in love” (niv). The imagery of **united** is that of a body being held together by ligaments to make a strong unit. Unity and solidarity create strength. False teaching is naturally divisive. A person left alone, with no support, is much more vulnerable than a cohesive unit.

What creates unity? **Love!** Concern for one another. Relating to one another as brothers and sisters, with loyalty and support. When we are united in love, we will be strengthened in heart. Then we will have assurance in understanding.

A loving, learning community will produce believers who are settled in their **understanding** of the truth. Believers who link themselves with fellow believers, who care for one another, and who grow in their understanding of Jesus Christ will stand a good chance of remaining stable and confident.

Understanding has a very definite object: Jesus **Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**. In contrast to the false teachers at Colosse, who said that wisdom and knowledge were hidden away in mystical experience and higher knowledge, Paul says that **all** wisdom and knowledge are **hidden**, or deposited, in Christ. He is all we need. We will never mine all the treasure found in a full knowledge of Jesus Christ:

- In Colossians 1, we see that Jesus is the Lord of creation and reconciliation.
- In Colossians 2, Jesus is the fullness of deity, the forgiver of sins, and the conqueror of satanic forces.
- In Colossians 3, Jesus is the resurrected Lord, and our life.

- In Colossians 4, Jesus is the one worthy of devoted service. The false teachers claimed that spiritual experience was found in “secret” knowledge, available only to the initiated elite. Paul says that the only **mystery** (literally “secret”) we need to know is Christ.

If believers come to a settled understanding that true treasure is found only in Christ, they won’t be deceived by **fine-sounding arguments**. This term literally means “pithy words.” False teaching promotes itself through “smooth talk,” but it’s still just “high sounding nonsense.” We need to be careful of lies that come all dressed up in persuasive speech when all they do is hide naked error.

**2:5.** The bad news in the Book of Colossians is that believers were under attack. The good news is that they were standing strong. Paul, **though ... absent ... in body**, is **delight[ed]** to see how **orderly ... and ... firm [their] faith in Christ is**. **Orderly** and **firm** are military metaphors which paint the picture of the Colossians not breaking rank or defecting. When the enemy attacked, the Colossians maintained a solid front.

**2:6–7.** Believers can avoid the deception of verse 8 not by just maintaining a solid front but by moving forward with steady progress. When we stop going forward, we stall; when we stall, we can fall. We **received Christ Jesus as Lord**. Now we are to **continue to live** with him as our Lord. **Live** literally means walk. Step by step, day by day, we are to conduct our affairs in conscious submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Life is a journey, and we are not expected to sprint through it. We are just to make steady progress.

Steady progress is possible when we are grounded or **rooted**. Christians are not to be tumbleweeds with no roots, blown about by every wind of doctrine. We avoid this when we are firmly rooted in Jesus Christ. Roots don’t exist for themselves: they exist to give the plant strength and help the plant grow. We are to be **rooted** and then **built up** and **strengthened**. We are to grow. How are we to grow? We are to grow **in the faith [we] were taught**. We have no need to seek secret or “higher” knowledge. We are to grow in knowledge of the truth already revealed in Christ. Finally, Paul wants us **overflowing with thankfulness**. This comes when we recognize that we are complete in Christ, that we have every opportunity to grow spiritually in him. A thankful believer is not easily led away from Christ. A discontented, grumbling, whiny believer, however, will be easy prey for false teachers who are more than willing to offer “just what you’ve been missing.”

**2:8.** Believers face the very real threat of being captivated by false teaching and lured away from an unswerving devotion to the absolute supremacy of Christ. Paul’s warning now becomes direct: **See to it that no one takes you captive**. **Captive** means “to carry away” or “kidnap.” Here it refers to someone being carried away from the truth into the slavery of error.

**Philosophy** threatened to carry the Colossians away from the truth. This is not a blanket indictment against all philosophy. The reference here is to the particular philosophy, as seen in Paul’s description that follows, being promoted by the false teachers. This **philosophy** is **hollow and deceptive**, literally, an empty deception which stands in stark contrast to the **fullness** in Christ (1:19; 2:9). The **hollow and deceptive philosophy** of the false teachers promises much but delivers nothing.

Paul provided the Colossians with the two origins of this **philosophy**, neither of which is **Christ**. First, Paul says this empty deception is based on **human tradition**. William Barclay says, “It was a product of the human mind; and not a message of the Word of God” (Barclay, 164).

The second source of this empty deception was **the basic principles of this world**. The Greek phrase (*stoicheia tou kosmou*) means “component parts of a series.” It sometimes refers to elementary teaching like the ABCs. Sometimes, and most likely here, it refers to elemental powers or cosmic spirits. Paul mentioned spirit beings previously (1:16), telling us that Christ created the spirits which the false teachers venerated. Paul will mention them again (2:10, 15), telling us that Christ defeated the spirit beings. Paul’s warning is clear. Don’t allow yourselves to be kidnapped by an empty deception based on human ideas and defeated spirit beings. Referring to the false teachers and their philosophy, Eugene Peterson

translates this phrase, “They spread their lies through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings” (Peterson, 501).

**2:9–10.** When false teaching attacks, it usually attacks on two fronts: (1) the person of Jesus Christ and (2) the believer’s identity in him. False teachers fail to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is God and undermine his uniqueness as the God-Man. False teachers propose that “something more” is needed to make the earnest disciple complete. It may be new knowledge, freshly revealed to the cult leader; it may be ecstatic experiences which are supposed to usher the individual into new vistas of insight; it may be legalistic activity which demonstrates sincerity.

Paul addresses both lies in verses 9–10 where he tells us that we are full in the full one. Jesus Christ is completely God, and we are complete in him. We just need to grow. The Christian always grows by nutrition (feeding on his Word) and not by addition.

Paul tells the Colossians that because **in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form**, they have no excuse for being deceived. The sum total of deity resides in Jesus, the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1, 14). **All the fullness** is actually a tautology (saying the same thing twice in different words) and serves to underscore that the “fullness” is found exclusively in Christ. Fullness is not found in the host of spirit beings supposedly emanating from God. They are not the fullness of God; Christ is. The fullness living in Christ **in bodily form** points not only to Jesus’ **Deity** but also to his humanity. This is a direct argument against the idea that matter is evil and that the fullness of God could not be found in Jesus, who assumed human flesh.

False teachers seek to kidnap believers by empty deception. Because of their vital union with Jesus, the full one, believers have **been given fullness** (John 1:16; Eph. 3:19; 4:13). This spiritual fullness is found **in Christ, who is the head [authority] over every power and authority**. It is futile to look for spiritual fulfillment or maturity in any other place than Jesus Christ, who is the treasure house of all wisdom and knowledge and the fullness of deity.

## **B. Our Total Forgiveness in Christ (vv. 11–15)**

**Supporting Idea:** *Jesus is our crucified conqueror, and we are forgiven by him.*

**2:11–13a.** Jesus Christ is fully God, and we are full in him. But what does spiritual fullness mean? How is it ours? In verses 11–15, Paul completes the argument of verses 9–10. Paul begins his explanation of fullness with complete salvation. The metaphors Paul chooses to explain our full salvation are **circumcision** and **baptism**. The point of these metaphors is that we are saved totally and exclusively through the work of God, not through any human activity.

No religious ritual can make us **alive with Christ**. Paul picks two familiar rituals in these verses, but he clearly is not talking about the physical acts of **circumcision** and **baptism**. Instead, he is talking about the spiritual reality behind the physical rite. The Jews were masters at physical rites. In Genesis 17, God instituted circumcision as a physical sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Every male was to be circumcised as tangible testimony that he was in a covenant relationship with Yahweh. The Jews began mistakenly to think that the physical ritual was sufficient all by itself.

The Bible is clear even in the Old Testament (Deut. 10:16; 30:6) that physical circumcision saves no one. This becomes even more unmistakable in the New Testament (Rom. 2:28–29). The circumcision Paul is talking about in Colossians 2:11 is the spiritual operation of putting away or cutting away—not of a piece of flesh—but the **putting off of the “sinful nature”** (niv) or the “old man” as it is referred to in Romans 6. What we were in Adam—sinful, fallen, corrupt—Christ destroyed. This happened at the moment of salvation when we were spiritually baptized into Jesus Christ. The **baptism** Paul is talking about (v. 12) is the spiritual baptism where we are united and identified with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:1–7).

How does **the putting off of the sinful nature** take place? Is it a simple outpatient procedure that can be done in virtually any medical clinic? No. For all our modern medical sophistication, no surgery can cut out our **sinful nature** and give us new life. This is an operation only God can perform. Paul tells us it is not **done by the hands of men** (v. 11).

**2:13b–14.** The second reality of spiritual fullness is total forgiveness—the cancellation of a debt we could never pay. **[God] forgave us all our sins**. Paul gives us a detailed description of what forgiveness involves.

In verse 14, Paul speaks of a **written code** with **regulations**, which stands **against us** and is **opposed to us**. The word Paul used here refers to a certificate of indebtedness or a signed confession of guilt which stood as a perpetual witness against the debtor. It was an ancient IOU.

two things comprise this certificate of indebtedness: the **regulations** of the law and our offenses. Both of these stand against us and highlight our debt. What does God do with this signed confession of guilt? He cancels the debt. The word **anceled** also means “to wipe out, wash over, or erase.” God erases the document and cancels the debt.

How can he do that? Doesn't that make the law cheap when guilty people are set free without having to pay for their crimes? Absolutely not. God himself paid the debt when his Son died on the cross. God upheld the holiness of his own law when Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin. God not only erased the document, but he also **took it away**, by **nailed it to the cross**. When Jesus died, the condemning document was destroyed. We are fully forgiven.

**2:15.** Spiritual fullness means complete salvation, full forgiveness, and absolute victory. We have spiritual fullness because of our participation in the conquest of the cross.

On the cross a cosmic drama was played out as God, in Christ, battled and gained victory over the powers of evil. Jesus Christ not only paid the penalty to atone for sin, but he also won a decisive victory over Satan and all the host of supernatural beings who were in league with him. Verse 15 tells us that Jesus Christ **triumphed** over the **powers and authorities by the cross**. The cross was the consummation of a life of conquest of Christ over Satan. As early as Genesis 3:15, God promised that a conqueror would come to crush the head of the serpent. Satan attempted to destroy Jesus through the efforts of Herod, but he was unsuccessful. Satan attempted to destroy Jesus with his own temptation in the wilderness. Again, unsuccessful. On the cross Jesus consummated his victory. As he died, he defeated Satan because he died to forgive sin. Sin was Satan's trump card. Jesus defeated Satan and his evil league on the cross—first by being there and then by abolishing sin's condemning power.

We have a tendency to think of the death of Christ as his defeat and the resurrection as his victory. No. Christ won a victory over sin and Satan on the cross. The resurrection was God's vindication of the victory already won. The resurrection was a declaration of power that Jesus is the Son of God; it is public demonstration that confirms that his death had been effective for the forgiveness of sin.

Jesus also **disarmed** the **powers and authorities**. He broke their power and stripped them of their controlling influence over humans. Jesus celebrated his victory by making a **public spectacle** of the conquered powers. The picture comes from a common Roman military practice. When a general won a victory, a triumphal procession made its way through the streets, with the successful general leading the way. His army followed, singing songs of conquest and reveling in their victory. Bringing up the rear would be the defeated king and his warriors, subjected to public ridicule and paraded for all to see.

On the cross, Jesus won a decisive victory, making clear to the universe that Satan is a vanquished foe. This does not mean that we will not have conflict. The devil has been defeated, but he has not yet conceded defeat. He has been overthrown, but he has not yet been fully eliminated. Satan continues to harass us. When we understand our identity in Christ, we can live above Satan's control.

## C. Our Complete Freedom in Christ (vv. 16–23)

**Supporting Idea:** *Jesus is our life source, and we are free through him.*

**2:16–17.** The fullness and freedom that are ours in Christ ought to motivate us to maintain our devotion to the one who gave us that fullness and set us free. We have no reason to become enslaved by legalistic living, mystical experience, or rigid self-denial. Because of our fullness in Christ (declared in 2:10 and described in 2:11–15), Paul tells us that we should not allow others to **judge** us. The term **judge** means “pass unfavorable judgment on, criticize, or find fault with.” We are not to allow others to intimidate us or question our spirituality.

How might others attempt to convince us that our spirituality is suspect? Apparently some in Colosse tried to convince the believers that spirituality was based on how well they observed certain codes of behavior. Paul mentions diets (**what you eat or drink**) and days (**religious festival, New Moon celebration, Sabbath day**). The false teachers said that the truly spiritual maintained a particular diet and properly observed all the right holy days.

What about this? Is the Christian bound to strict observance of diets and days? No. Two passages of Scripture make this clear (Heb. 9:10; Gal. 4:8–11). Here in Colossians 2:17, Paul informs us that rule keeping is just a **shadow**: there is no real spiritual substance. The **reality** (literally the “body” which casts the shadow) is **found in Christ**. Again and again, whatever the topic, Paul brings believers back to Christ.

Legalism—measuring your own or someone else’s spirituality by the ability to keep man-made rules—is a rigid, confining, and lifeless way to live. It is easy because all it requires is a list of rules coupled with dutiful compliance. Wisdom or the skillful application of biblical principles to life’s situations is unnecessary. Just comply. Legalism is not only rigid and lifeless, but it also fosters hypocritical pride. The Pharisees (ancient and modern) prove that. A focus on conformity to a code can cause one to forget things like arrogant pride, smug judgmentalism, anger, and a host of other dark sins that never seem to make the list.

**2:18–19.** Fullness and freedom mean that believers need not be drawn into the quest for exciting experiences. Apparently, the false teachers were telling the believers at Colosse that mystical visions and deeper experiences were necessary to make them truly spiritual. Once again, Paul brings the issue back to Christ.

Scholars debate whether the **worship of angels** referred to the angels being the objects of worship (the worship given to angels) or to the worship that the angels perform. Either are possible, but the former seems most likely. The mystical experience began with initiation into ascetic rituals (possibly referred to in Col. 2:21) which led to supernatural visions in which the individual was ushered into the heavenly realms to worship the angels who emanated from God or to join with the angels in the worship of God. The worshiper would then return with all kinds of stories about **what he [had] seen** in his vision. The Colossians were being told that if they really wanted to reach new levels of spirituality they needed to engage in these kinds of experiences. The mystical journey was intended to restore a lost dimension to spiritual experience.

Paul says this kind of spiritual quest is in fact a dangerous distraction. The person loses **connection with the Head, from whom the whole body** grows. The vision becomes the focus; Jesus becomes secondary. As a result growth is stunted, and believers are **disqualif[ied] ... for the prize**. This phrase is actually one Greek term meaning “act as umpire against you.” It could mean “let no one pass critical judgment against you,” or it could mean “let no one deprive you of spiritual reward” because you have become distracted by a quest for experiences. Paul does not want Christians to be robbed of assurance and made to feel unspiritual, unfaithful, and in need of something extra—something more and higher than the cross.

This quest for superspiritual experience, like the legalism of the previous verses, fosters pride. The experience seeker **delights in false humility**, but **his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions**. Believers may have spiritual experiences of varying kinds. Experiences themselves are not evil. When we try to make our experience the standard for all believers or when we measure our own or someone else's spirituality on the basis of that experience, we're being arrogant and unspiritual.

Christ is central. Not rules. Not experiences. Christ.

**2:20–23.** Paul's final warning is against asceticism—a religious philosophy which teaches that depriving the body of its normal desires is a means of achieving greater holiness and approval from God. Paul nullifies this notion as well. Again, Paul mentions the **basic principles of the world** and **human commands and teachings** (Col. 2:8). He is telling the Colossian believers to move on to maturity and to get past the elementary stages of spiritual life. He has told them that they are free, so why would they **submit to rules?**

Self-denial as a self-imposed form of spirituality is all appearance. Paul says it has **an appearance of wisdom**. It certainly looks spiritual when someone goes through all sorts of sacrifices supposedly to bring them closer to God. Asceticism has taken different shapes over time: wearing thick hair shirts close to the skin (as if itching is spiritual); sleeping on hard beds; whipping oneself; or prolonged fasting.

Paul tells us that asceticism is all appearance and no value. Paul says this kind of behavior has no **value in restraining sensual indulgence**. In other words, all this external performance has no effect on internal urges. Alexander Maclaren said, "There is only one thing that will put the collar on the neck of the animal within us, and that is the power of the indwelling Christ." When Jesus is given control, he not only gives us the Holy Spirit to fight against the flesh, but he also gives us new desires as well. We don't need rules for the outside because we have the Spirit on the inside. We simply need to yield to him.

**Main Idea Review:** *Knowing the truth that fullness, forgiveness, and freedom are found in Jesus strengthens believers against attractive but empty deception.*

### III. Conclusion

#### Fullness at the Table

Imagine for a moment that you are poor and needy. You are desperate. Ragged, shabby clothes. You haven't eaten in several days. You are cold, and you are tired because you have been walking all day. Darkness advances swiftly. You notice some lights in the distance through the trees. Your aching stomach urges your throbbing feet to keep going just a little farther. As you draw closer, you see the lights are a blaze of white against the night. It's a huge house. Curtains are drawn back to reveal activity inside. You inch closer for a better look, until your face presses against the window. You stand there for a few moments without being noticed—shocked at what you see. It's a feast. A huge table is covered from end to end with more food than you've seen in months—green vegetables, steaming meat, cold drinks, warm bread. Your stomach rumbles; your mouth waters. You feel faint from hunger. As a butler is serving the guests, the master of the house glances over and notices your face pressed against the window. He thinks to himself, *Here is a needy person*. He motions for the butler to go out and speak to you. Your first instinct is to try to get away fast, because you think they want to punish you for trespassing. The butler calls out to you, "Please, the master would like you to come in and dine at the table." So you go in—and eat. Your great need has been met by the fullness of the table.

In a similar way, our great spiritual need has been met by the fullness of the table of blessings in Christ. Jesus Christ is the fullness of deity, and from his fullness he has given us spiritual fullness. Why look elsewhere? Why look for treasure we already have? As believers we have the awesome opportunity to feed at the table of spiritual blessing in Christ.

The truth about Christ and Christians is that Christ is the fullness of God, and Christians have been given fullness in him.

### Principles

- The threat of false teaching is cause for serious concern.
- Vital involvement in a loving, learning community is a defense against deception.
- Ongoing growth in the believer's life is a defense against deception.
- Jesus Christ is fully God.
- Every believer has spiritual fullness because of vital union with Christ.
- Every believer has experienced full forgiveness.
- Jesus defeated Satan on the cross and stripped him, and all his demons, of their power over mankind.
- Spirituality is not a matter of rules or experiences, but a relationship with and obedience to Jesus Christ.

### Applications

- Involve yourself in a local assembly where you can learn and grow in Christ with fellow believers.
- Reflect on a regular basis the essential truths that will keep Jesus central:
  1. Jesus is fully God. Nothing needs to be added to him.
  2. You have fullness in him. Nothing needs to be added to you.
- Be on the alert for false teaching. Don't be naive and think it was just a first-century problem.
- Don't allow yourself to be intimidated by those who tell you that you need something more. Just keep growing in your walk with Christ.

## IV. Life Application

### Keep Your Eye on the Ball

In his book *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, J. I. Packer reminds us of the need to keep Jesus Christ central. He warns of the danger of becoming preoccupied with the Spirit rather than the Savior to whom the Spirit points. Such warning applies to anything which might distract us from Jesus Christ.

Should our interest shift from knowing the Son to knowing the Spirit, two evils would at once result. On the one hand, like the Colossian angel worshippers, we should impoverish ourselves by "... not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God" (Colossians 2:19). On the other hand, we should enmesh ourselves in a world of spurious "spiritual" feelings and fancies that are not Christ related and do not correspond to anything that actually exists except Satan's web of deceptions and his endless perversions of truth and goodness. We should not take one step down this road. Questions about the Holy Spirit that are not forms and facets of the basic question, How may I and all Christians—and indeed all the world—come to know Jesus Christ and know him better? ought not to be asked. This is a basic mental discipline that the Bible imposes on us. In golf it would be described as keeping your eye on the ball (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1984, 92).

Spirituality is not a matter of knowing more Bible facts or having all the doctrinal wrinkles ironed out. Spirituality is not a matter of conformity to a code of rules. Spirituality is not a matter of exciting experiences. Knowledge, rules, and experiences all foster pride. Finally, spirituality is not a matter of recipes: "Do these three things two times a day and you'll be spiritual." Spirituality is not mechanical. These things seem so spiritual but are nothing more than distractions.

What then is genuine spirituality?

### **An Attitude: Trust**

An attitude of trust means that I confidently rely on, put my weight on, Jesus Christ. Whatever life throws at me, I trust him. In my business practices, do I trust God rather than manipulate? Can I trust that he will provide and reward me even if I do what others think foolish? Can I trust him when things don't go my way?

### **A Behavior: Obedience**

"If you love me, keep my commandments," Jesus said. Spirituality is loving obedience to Jesus Christ, not legalistic conformity to a man-made code. It's loving obedience to the Word of God, not chasing the flash and pizzazz of experiences. Simple, loving obedience.

Spirituality is an attitude of trust and a behavior of obedience. Life is challenging; and as we face it, God simply wants us to trust and obey. Spirituality is not a matter of rules or experiences but a relationship with, and obedience to, Jesus Christ. Let's keep our eye on the ball.

## **V. Prayer**

Sovereign Lord, as we look to Christ in whom all the fullness of deity dwells, may we live lives worthy of him and consistent with his fullness which has been given to us. Keep us satisfied with Christ when all the world around us is clamoring for more. Amen.

## **VI. Deeper Discoveries**

### **A. Struggle (v. 1)**

Louw and Nida define the Greek word for *struggle (agon)* as, "to engage in intense struggle, involving physical or nonphysical force against strong opposition" (*Greek English Lexicon*, New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, II:496). The same word can describe an actual race (compare Heb. 12:1). The Word pictures an athlete agonizing during training to be victorious in competition. The strenuous demands of the contest would exact a physical and emotional toll on the participants. Paul used strong words to describe the intensity of his concern and his labor for the growth of the Colossians (1:28–29). Paul's struggle was on behalf of the believers at Colosse and Laodicea; the finish line would be reached when the believers were encouraged in heart, united in love, and assured in understanding the mystery.

### **B. Laodicea (v. 1)**

Laodicea, a small town about eleven miles west of Colosse, was one of three principle cities in the Lycus River Valley. (Hierapolis, mentioned in 4:13, was the third). Known for its production of black wool, Laodicea was situated at an important crossroads of two trade routes. One route went from the western port cities of Ephesus and Miletus, through Laodicea, and on eastward to Syria. The North-South route traveled from Pergamum in the north to Attalia in the south. Its location on these two prominent trade routes made Laodicea a thriving commercial center in Southwest Asia. By the time Paul wrote this epistle, Laodicea had eclipsed Colosse as the dominant city in the region.

The city is most well-known in the Bible as the city of the "lukewarm church" in Revelation 3:15–16. The city was quite familiar with lukewarm water because its water supply came from a hot spring, was piped into the town, and arrived lukewarm. An earthquake destroyed the city in a.d. 60, but it recovered without any aid from the Roman Emperor Nero. Eventually, the site of the city was abandoned, and another town was built closer to the springs. Paul refers to Epaphras throughout the book and

demonstrates his concern for the people of Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. It would seem that Epaphras had started churches in all three cities.

### C. Fine-sounding arguments (v. 4)

Literally “pithy words,” the phrase translated as **fine-sounding arguments** is loaded. The term is used rhetorically to refer to speeches based on logical reasoning rather than demonstration. In one court case, the word is used to describe a criminal’s attempt to persuade the court to let him keep stolen goods (see Lohse, 83). The indication is that those who use these fine-sounding words are constructing plausible, but false, arguments to manipulate others. As Paul states in verse 8, for such people the truth is not a concern. Their philosophy is hollow and deceptive. Clearly, this is persuasive speaking in the worst sense. Given the context in which Paul uses the word, images of the stereotypical used car salesman come to mind.

### D. Metaphors of growth (v. 7)

Paul uses four participles to describe the manner in which believers should live and grow. The first three participles are passive indicating that divine activity is predominant. Dan Wallace writes that with the passive voice, “no volition—nor even necessarily awareness of the action—is implied on the part of the subject. That is, the subject may or may not be aware, its volition may or may not be involved. But these things are not stressed when the passive is used” (*Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, 431). Believers are being rooted, being built up, and being strengthened. Clearly God is the one rooting, building, and strengthening. The last participle changes to active voice, indicating the response of the believer to God’s work in his life. “In general it can be said that in the active voice the subject performs, produces, or experiences the action or exists in the state expressed by the verb” (Wallace, 410).

Of particular interest is the fact that the first participle (“being rooted”) is a perfect participle. The other participles are present. The perfect is used when the author is describing an event which has been completed in the past and has continuing results in the present.

In summary, God has rooted the believer in Christ at the time of conversion in a completed sense, but that rooting is having continuing results in the present. At the same time God, in an ongoing process, builds up and strengthens the faith of the believer, which results in the believer’s active response in thankfulness.

**1. Rooted:** This perfect passive participle indicates a condition that results from some past action. The past action is their conversion when they received Christ (2:6). As a result of their conversion, they are firmly rooted like the foundation of a building. The word (*rizao*) can also be used in a horticultural context: the roots of a plant are set, providing a firm foundation for the growth of the plant itself. However, in this context as well as in Ephesians 3:17, an architectural metaphor applies. This suggests that the term might best be understood as part of an extended metaphor of building that develops with the three participles. The term is often used this way. Believers are first foundationally rooted as a result of their conversion. Then a spiritual structure is built on the foundation.

**2. Build up:** This present passive participle indicates God’s continual activity needed for growth. The believers are continually being more and more built up. After laying the foundation, God erects the structure. This is a process which takes time, but believers are encouraged not to grow weary along the way. God is in the process of making us into a museum of divine artwork.

**3. Strengthened:** This present passive participle again focuses on the continual and progressive nature of God’s activity. The believers are being more and more strengthened. Once the foundation has been laid and the building has been erected, the building itself settles in and is made increasingly stronger. Again, the activity of God is primary, and yet the results are ours to enjoy. That is why we are finally overflowing with thankfulness.

**4. Overflowing:** This present active participle gives the natural response of the believer to the work of God in his life described in the three previous participles. As God does his work of laying the foundation, building the structure, and strengthening the entire building, the believer will—like a geyser—overflow with thanksgiving for all God has done for him.

If these metaphors are all joined together, the image is of a beautiful building, designed by a master architect, constructed by the world's best builder, approved as worthy by the most stringent code inspector, and enhanced by a lovely fountain in front—placed there in honor of the architect, builder, and inspector who are all the same person.

## **E. In Christ all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form (v. 9)**

Jesus Christ was God in a body. This passage describes both Christ's deity and his humanity. The God-Man was both fully divine and fully human. *Deity* (*theotes*) is used to refer to the essence of God as opposed to the attributes (*theiotes* as in Rom. 1:20) of God. Christ possesses the fullness of the essence of God.

The evidence for the deity of Christ has been affirmed throughout the history of Christianity. Christ has the attributes of deity, performs the actions of deity, is given the titles of deity, and claims deity of himself. In addition the apostles also claim deity for Jesus as well.

### **Christ Possesses the Attributes of Deity**

1. Eternity (John 8:58; 17:5; Isa. 9:6; Mic. 5:2)
2. Omnipresence (Matt. 18:20; 28:20; John 3:13; 1:50)
3. Omniscience (Matt. 16:21; Luke 6:8; John 2:24, 25; 6:64; 21:17)
4. Omnipotence (Matt. 28:18; Mark 5:11–15; Phil. 3:21)
5. Immutability (Heb. 1:10–12; 13:8)
6. All attributes of deity belong to Christ (Col. 2:9)

### **Christ Performs the Work of Deity**

1. Creation (John 1:3, 10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2)
2. Preservation (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3)
3. Forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:24; Col. 3:13)
4. Power to raise the dead (John 5:21; 11:43)
5. Judgment of the world (John 5:22, 27; 2 Cor. 5:10)

### **Christ Accepted the Worship Due Deity**

1. John 5:23
2. Luke 24:52

### **Christ is Given the Titles of Deity**

1. Son of God (Matt. 26:63–64; Mark 1:1; John 10:36)
2. Son of man (Dan. 7:13; Mark 2:10)
3. YHWH (Luke 1:76 [compare Mal. 3:1]; Rom. 10:13 [compare Joel 2:32])
4. God (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Heb. 1:8)

### **Jesus Claimed to Be God**

1. By claiming to be YHWH (Luke 1:76)
2. By accepting worship (Matt. 28; John 9)
3. By identifying himself with God in context of monotheism (John 10:30; 17:5).
4. By explicit claims (John 8:58)
5. By claiming to do what only God can do (John 5:19–27; Matt. 12:5–8)
6. By accepting the titles of deity (John 20:28; Matt. 16:16)

## **The Apostles Claim that Jesus Is God**

Apostolic assertions for Christ's deity can be found in John 1:1; Colossians 1:19; 2:9; Hebrews 1:8, and Titus 2:13. (The grammar of this verse demands an interpretation which combines God and Savior as a reference to Christ by virtue of Granville Sharp's Rule. The rule states that in an article, "noun, *kai*, noun construction" the two nouns have the same referent.)

## **Messianic Proof of Christ's Deity**

1. The Old Testament says "Messiah is God."
  - Isaiah 7:14: Immanuel
  - Isaiah 9:6: Mighty God
  - Isaiah 40:10: LORD God
  - Daniel 7:13–28: Ancient of Days
  - Micah 5:2: From Everlasting
  - Zechariah 12:10: YHWH
  - Zechariah 14:16: Lord of Hosts (or Lord Almighty)
  - Psalms 45:6: God (Heb. 1:8)
  - Psalms 110:1: Lord—(Matt. 22)
  - Psalms 118:22: Stone (used 4 times in New Testament)
2. Jesus is Messiah (Hebrew basis for Greek *christos* or Christ)
  - Matthew 16:16–17, 20
  - Mark 8:29
  - Luke 9:20Jesus alone fulfills all the prophecies.
3. Therefore Jesus is God.

Having set forth the biblical teaching that Christ is both human and deity, the next theological task is to set forth the relationship between these two natures in Christ. This is commonly referred to as the Hypostatic Union. In discussing this topic, the student of Scripture may describe the union but have limited understanding of the details of that union.

The orthodox statement of the Hypostatic Union, first set forth by the Council of Chalcedon in a.d. 451 (a meeting of early Christian leaders to clarify scriptural truth), says:

In agreement, therefore, with the holy fathers, we all unanimously teach harmoniously that we should confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in manhood, like us in all things except sin; begotten from the Father before the ages as regards His Godhead, in the last days, the same, because of us and because of our salvation begotten from the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, made known in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union, but the property of each nature being preserved, and coalescing in one person (*prosopon*) and one hypostasis (*hupostasis*)—not parted or divided into two persons (*prosopa*), but one and the same Son, only begotten, divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets of old and Jesus Christ himself have taught us about him, and the creed of our Fathers has handed down (J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978, 339–40).

This excellent treatment is true to Scripture in affirming, without minimizing, the deity and humanity of Christ. This statement grew out of a debate in response to a number of various approaches to the two natures. During the debate, the church seemed to be much more suited to identifying the wrong teaching

without making a positive statement of the right teaching. Chalcedon is the final positive statement of the orthodox position, although it is somewhat negative in tone telling us more about what the union is not, than what it is.

In keeping with the practice of the church throughout history, the following discussion will identify the unorthodox views of the Hypostatic Union in order to focus more properly on the orthodox view.

Only six variations of the unorthodox position have been conceived; other offerings are merely variations of those six, which appeared in the first five centuries. The errors fall into three groups of two each:

### **Errors Concerning the Deity of Christ**

1. *Ebionitism*: Jesus was a normal man possessing unusual but not superhuman or supernatural gifts of righteousness and wisdom. The literal son of Joseph and Mary, he was the predestined Messiah but only in a natural sense. Ebionitism denies the deity of Christ.
2. *Arianism*: Jesus is the absolute uniqueness of God, but he is a created being, made by God. Christ is similar to God, but he is not God. Arianism diminishes the deity of Christ.

### **Errors Concerning the Humanity of Christ**

1. *Docetism*: Christ only appeared to be a man. Jesus was not actually born to Mary; he merely passed through her. Docetism denies the humanity of Christ.
2. *Apollinarianism*: Christ had a human body and a human soul, but the divine logos replaced a human spirit. Thus, Jesus was nearly human but not totally so. Whereas Docetism denied the humanity of Christ, Apollinarianism diminishes the humanity of Christ.

### **Errors Concerning the Two Natures of Christ**

1. *Nestorianism*: Jesus actually has two separate and distinct natures: the human Jesus, and the divine Christ, who appeared in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. This is a separation of the two natures of Christ into two persons.
2. *Monophysitism*: The divine nature of Christ is not fully divine, and the human nature is not fully human. The union of the two natures resulted in a new mixed nature that is Christ. Thus, Monophysitism, also known as Eutychianism, is a mixture of the two natures.

### **Orthodoxy**

The orthodox position was carved out of the reaction to the unorthodox positions. Charles Ryrie's summary of the nature of the union is helpful. "There is no mixture of the divine and human attributes (as Eutychians taught), no change in either complex (as Apollinarians taught), no dividing of them and no separating them so as to have two persons (as Nestorians taught). Orthodoxy says two natures comprising one person or hypostasis forever" (*Basic Theology*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1986, 250).

Millard Erickson has set forth five principles, which he labels, "Basic Tenets of the Doctrine of Two Natures in One Person." These are helpful in formulating an exposition of the orthodox statement of Chalcedon.

1. The incarnation was more a gaining of human attributes than a giving up of divine attributes. This is directly related to the issue of the *kenosis*.
2. The union of the two natures means that they do not function independently. The divine nature of Christ was in some way limited by the circumstance of being in union with the human nature, but this is not a full limitation of his divine ability. Erickson provides an excellent illustration to make the point clear: if the world's fastest sprinter were running in a three-legged race, his union with another runner would limit his ability to run in that circumstance, but it would not limit his ability in himself to be the fastest sprinter in the world. In the same way Christ was limited by the circumstance of being in a human body, but this is not a real limitation of his deity.

3. Christ is fully God and fully human. This must be understood from the point of view that Christ reveals to us what *fully God* and *fully human* actually mean. Christ was not fully like us. We are fallen humanity, and he is full humanity. Christ has the same nature as Adam before the fall, which is not like our nature.
4. The incarnation is God becoming man, not man becoming God.
5. It is helpful to think of Jesus as a very complex person.

## **F. Power and authority (vv. 10, 15)**

(See “Deeper Discoveries” on 1:16.)

## **G. Sinful nature (vv. 11, 13)**

The niv translates the Greek word *flesh* (*sarkos*) as sinful nature. The usage of the word *flesh* in the writings of Paul indicate that it is the locus of the sinful desires of man (see especially Gal. 5:19–21). It is not a physical element of man; rather it is a part of his nature, or better, it is his nature. The flesh is acting out what comes naturally as opposed to acting out what comes spiritually or by the Spirit. Louw and Nida provide an excellent summary when they write that the sinful nature is,

... the psychological aspect of human nature which contrasts with the spiritual nature; in other words, [it is] that aspect of human nature which is characterized by or reflects typical human reasoning and desires in contrast to those aspects of human thought and behavior which relate to God and spiritual life.... Some scholars understand the meaning of *sarx* as being a person’s “lower nature” rather than simply “human nature,” but the distinction between lower nature and higher nature seems to be primarily arising out of typical Greek thought rather than out of the Semitic background which seems to be so pervasive in the use of the term *sarx* in such contexts in the NT. There are, of course, contexts in which *sarx* does refer to that psychological factor in man which serves as a willing instrument of sin and is subject to sin (Louw and Nida, 322–3).

## **H. The written code (v. 14)**

The niv’s translation of **written code** (*cheirograpon*) does not capture the financial nature of the term well. The nasb’s “certificate of debt” is closer to the meaning. The Greek language uses several terms for *debt*. This particular term combines the two words *hand* and *writing*, giving rise to the kjv translation of “handwriting.” The emphasis of this term seems to be that the record of the debt owed would be signed by the debtor. Fragments from New Testament times have been recovered which have handwritten signatures on such records of debt (Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910, 331). This term shows that we have signed an IOU which is evidence of the enormous debt we owe to God.

## **I. What you eat or drink, religious festival, new moon celebration, sabbath day (v. 16)**

Regulations against eating certain types of food are found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:1–21. Clean and unclean animals are sorted out, and unclean animals are forbidden. Laws regulating drink are less common but some may include Leviticus 10:9 which regulates the priest’s consumption of wine; Leviticus 11:34 which prohibits drinking from an unclean vessel; and Numbers 6:3 which requires the man under a Nazarite vow to abstain from wine, strong drink, and even grape juice. While these regulations were not universally applicable to all Jews, the fact that they were applied to the elite (priests and Nazirites) may have appealed to the notion of the heresy at Colosse that created a class of those who were initiated and above the others.

The three terms **religious festival**, **New Moon celebration**, and **Sabbath** are often linked in the Old Testament as days set aside and dedicated to God (Hos. 2:13; Ezek. 45:17; 1 Chr. 23:31; 2 Chr. 2:4; 31:3). Regulations about religious festivals in general are found in Leviticus 23 and include Passover (vv. 4–8); Firstfruits (vv. 9–14); Feast of Weeks or Pentecost (vv. 15–22); Trumpets (vv. 23–25); Day of Atonement (vv. 26–32); and Tabernacles (vv. 33–44). The New Moon celebration is frequently spoken of in the Old Testament (Num. 10:10; 28:11; 1 Sam. 20:5, 18; Ps. 81:3; Hos. 2:11; Amos 8:5). This was a monthly celebration. The final word “sabbath” is in the plural, which may indicate both the celebration of the weekly sabbath (Lev. 23:1–3) and the Sabbath Year (25:1–7). None of these rituals qualify believers for membership in a higher class of spiritual worshipers. They belong to the old order of relationship to God before Christ. Christ has shown us the way of the cross, the way of God’s costly grace.

## **J. A shadow of things that were to come, the reality, however, is found in Christ (v. 17)**

Only Christ is reality. The Old Testament and all of its regulations were simply a shadow cast backward from Christ. Christ is also casting a shadow forward over our lives now. Only he is real. We live in what C. S. Lewis called the “Shadowlands.” In this life of shadows faith calls us to believe that “Real life hasn’t begun yet. This is only shadows.” We eagerly await real life when we will see reality, when we will see Christ. At that time we will be like him, for we will see him as he is (1 John 3:2.) At that time, we will be real; we’ll no longer live in the shadows, but in the radiance of his reality.

## **VII. Teaching Outline**

### **A. Introduction**

1. Lead story: Don’t Look for Treasure You Already Have
2. Context: In the second chapter of Colossians, Paul continues to counter the error of the false teachers, who were attempting to capture the Colossian believers with clever deception. Paul was concerned but encouraged that the believers were still maintaining a firm commitment to Christ. To ensure that they not be enticed by error, Paul made two simple but profound truth statements: Jesus is the fullness of deity, and believers are given fullness in him. Since both these things are true, believers should not be intimidated into thinking they need to add anything to their spiritual experience.
3. Transition: As we look at this chapter, we see the truth about our Savior and ourselves. Jesus is fully God (and fully man), and we are complete because of our association with him. It is ridiculous to attempt to add anything to something (or someone) that is full. It is unfortunate (and unnecessary) that many believers fail to understand the facts and advantages of fullness. Colossians 2 makes the truth unmistakably clear.

### **B. Commentary**

1. Our Absolute Fullness in Christ (vv. 1–10)
2. Our Total Forgiveness in Christ (vv. 11–15)
3. Our Complete Freedom in Christ (vv. 16–23)

### **C. Conclusion: Keep Your Eye on the Ball**

## VIII. Issues for Discussion

1. What philosophies and human traditions would Paul warn you about if he were writing today? How do you present the Christian truth over against these?
2. What does Paul regard as true circumcision?
3. What did God do in the cross of Jesus?
4. What rituals and legalisms threaten to replace the gospel today as the means to salvation?
5. How does the church grow? What threatens its growth?

Anders, M. (1999). [\*Galatians-Colossians\*](#) (Vol. 8, pp. 321–322). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.