

The Supremacy of Christ in the Face of Human Philosophy

Sunday, October 9, 2011

The point: You should reject any philosophy or teaching that is not according to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Truth #1: Make Christ Supreme over your Philosophy (2:8)

What does Paul mean by philosophy?

- Paul has no intent here to criticize philosophy in general but only the kind of philosophy being propagated by the Colossian false teachers.
- In Paul's day, the word "philosophy" could have been applied to virtually any system of thought. Josephus calls "Judaism" and all of the parties within it (Pharisees, Sadducees, etc.) as "philosophies."

How does Paul describe this philosophy?

- "Vain and deceitful": Vain in the sense that the teachings were void/empty of any intellectual, moral, or spiritual value.
- "According to human tradition": The teaching of the Greek philosophers, from Plato onward, was passed on from teacher to pupil. Just because people have believed something and handed it down through the years does not make it true. Paul rejects any possibility that their teaching had divine origins.
- "According to the elemental spirits/principles of the world (*stoicheia*)":
 - The dominant meaning of the word in Paul's day referred to the "fundamental components of the universe from which all matter was composed: air, earth, fire, and water.
 - The false teachers are both criticized for following rules that focus on material realities: food, observance days, circumcision (see 2:16, 18, 20-23).
 - In the ancient worldview, the material components of the universe were often associated with spiritual beings or the gods (there are gods that represent earth, water, air, and fire). With this background, a reference to the material elements would also include some reference to those deities or spirits who were so closely associated with the elements.
 - Whatever sense we end up giving to this phrase, the real sting in Paul's characterization of the false teachers comes in the third description: it is not "according to Christ." They are proclaiming a doctrine and demanding practices that do not depend on Christ.
- "Not according to Christ":
 - "Any teaching that in any way detracts from Christ's exclusive role is by definition wrong and ineffective" (Moo, 193).
 - The teachers themselves are probably not denying that Christ was central to God's saving purposes. They seem rather to be arguing that certain practices must be added on in order to achieve true spiritual fulfillment. But, for Paul, in this case, addition means subtraction: one cannot 'add' to Christ without, in effect, subtracting from his exclusive place in creation and in salvation history" (Moo, 193).

The following verses explain why my and your philosophy must be according to Christ.

Truth #2: See the fullness of God in Christ (2:9)

Main point: the “fullness of God” is found in Christ and Christ alone. Here Paul further elaborates on what he said earlier in Col. 1:19. Verse 9 is perhaps the most definitive statement of Christ’s deity in the epistles.

External witness:

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (d. 110-115), refers to Jesus as God 14 times in his seven letters so that usage seems well established in the postapostolic generation.

This is what sets Christ apart from every other philosophy and teaching: he is God. He’s not just a prophet, or a good teacher, he is God. **This changes everything!**

*If this is true, this changes everything/If this is real, I've got to tell the world
If He is God, then I've got a choice to make/If I believe, then I must follow Him*

The chorus from *This Changes Everything* by Matt Papa

Truth #3: Be filled with all spiritual fullness in Christ (2:10-15)

You have been brought to fullness in Christ (filled in him/made complete/given fullness in him): Christians experience spiritual “fullness” because they are in Christ, in whom “all the fullness of God dwells.”

“In other words, if *all* the fullness dwells in Christ, and the believer is in Christ, then the believer is complete in Christ and does not need any supplements. Just as in the mathematical realm one cannot add anything to infinity, so in the spiritual realm nothing can be added to Christ who is infinite” (Kostenberger, CCC, 613).

The false teachers could have been claiming: “We offer you the means to attain real spiritual fullness, to move on from Christ to a deeper spiritual experience.”

Over all rule and authority: Christ created all rule and authority (1:16). Christ is the source of the spiritual beings’ existence and the one who ultimately determines what they can and cannot do. Don’t fear them because they are under the control of their own “head.”

In the following verses, Paul elaborates this “fullness” that Christians experience in Christ.

1. Full Salvation (11-13a)

a. You died with Christ

Physical circumcision was instituted by God to be a sign of the covenant between him and the people of Israel (Gen. 17:1-4). Physical circumcision is an external act performed by human hands on a mere portion of the flesh eight days after birth. Physical circumcision “was made with hands.” Already though in the OT it was being used as a metaphor for circumcision of the heart (see Dt. 10:16; 30:6; cf. Jer. 4:4). After Christ’s death and resurrection the practice of the physical rite of circumcision is no longer required, since the end-time reality to which it pointed had come, and its purpose had been accomplished.

In contrast to this, Paul is saying that in Christ, you have been circumcised with “a circumcision made without hands,” namely the “circumcision of Christ.”

- This is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit and this is what truly marks you as a person belonging to the people of God (see Rom. 2:28-29).

b. You were buried with Christ

The picture of baptism: baptism is a picture of this spiritual circumcision.

- The importance of baptism: Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:38
- Because baptism was so linked with repentance and faith, he could refer to baptism as the timing of this spiritual circumcision, even though he qualifies it by showing the necessity of faith.

c. You were raised and made alive with Christ

You were dead...

- “in your trespasses”: actual sins committed
- “and in the uncircumcision of your flesh”: your carnal disposition which prompts sin

You have been made alive and raised:

- Realized eschatology: we have already been raised but we still wait for a resurrection from the dead. See Col. 3:1-4

2. Full Forgiveness (13b-14)

a. You are far more sinful than you could ever imagine

All sin is first against God. And that changes everything. Sin is always aimed first and foremost at God (Dt. 9:16; 1 Sam. 15:24; Ps. 51:4). “There can be no small sins against a great God” (J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness*, 135).

“Sin is wrong, not because of what it does to me, or my spouse, or child, or neighbor, but because it is an act of rebellion against the infinite holy and majestic God” (Jerry Bridges, *Discipline of Grace*, 193).

“Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet” (Thomas Watson).

b. God’s grace is more rich than you’ll ever know.

Two words pictures:

- 1) “Record of debt”: the picture here is of a document recording debts that you and I are obliged to pay. This is what we call an IOU: “I owe God obedience to his will. Signed, mankind.”
 - a. This record of debt stands AGAINST us because of our sins. Our sins are evidence that we have failed to give God the allegiance that we owe.
 - b. Therefore, this IOU stands against me and condemns me.
 - c. He wiped it clean!!!

- 2) He “nailed it to the cross”:
- a. God removed the IOU out of the situation by even nailing it to the cross. The cross highlights the completeness of it and the means by which God forgives.
 - b. “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgression, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more” (Is. 43:25).
 - c. The IOU has no power over you anymore.

ALL of your sins are forgiven: past, present, and future

How can you be forgiven of your sin?

- The necessity of repentance and faith: Acts 3:19

3. Full Victory (15)

“Paul insists that God, by sending Christ to the cross as the final and definitive means to take care of the sin problem, has removed any power that these evil spirits might have over us. This victory, celebrated and displayed in the resurrection and ascension of Christ, is what believers need to grasp as their own...Christ’s authority over the rulers and authorizes (v.10) has been decisively manifested; and ‘in him’ believers share that authority” (Moo, 216).

*My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*