

“Rooted in Christ” (Colossians 2:6–15)

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This past week, we had a memorial service. It was somewhat typical for a church service. A lot of the people there are churchgoers or used to be churchgoers. People generally dressed appropriately for the occasion. And that’s usually how things go. But several years ago, I was part of an interesting memorial service at my last church, where I was associate pastor. A man named Henry had died and his family came to our church because they needed a place where they could have a service. Henry wasn’t a member of that church. His family and friends were not members of the church. But the senior pastor agreed to conduct the service because he thought it would be a good opportunity to tell people about Jesus.

So, on that Saturday, we had an entirely different congregation show up at our church. The service started late because at least half the group was outside smoking. As I remember it, there were a lot of people in denim and leather. During the service, there was an opportunity for anyone to share memories or thoughts about Henry. One man stood up and said, “The thing about Henry is, he stuck to his roots. No matter what, he was true to his roots.” That was about all he said. Now, from hearing people speak, I got the sense that Henry touched many lives. He seemed to be a good friend and the people there loved him. But this friend, the one who stood up and spoke, didn’t say what Henry’s roots were. I suppose his friend meant that Henry was true to himself, a “what you see is what you get” kind of guy who was loyal to the people around him.

Who among us wouldn’t want someone to say at our funeral, “He stuck to his roots”? When we first hear that, it seems like a good thing. It sounds like this person didn’t compromise. No, he stuck to his guns. He didn’t sell out.

But we’re only as good as our roots. I don’t mean historical roots, or genealogical roots. We all have those, and sometimes they’re not good, but we can move away from them.

What I mean is that each one of our lives is rooted in something. Our lives are based on something, they’re built upon some foundation. Usually, this is what we believe is true or what is most valuable to us. For Christians, that root, that foundation, is Jesus Christ, our Lord. Today, in a passage from Colossians, we’re going to see how Christians need to stay rooted in Christ by continuing in their faith, avoiding all other philosophies and religions, and remembering the gospel.

Today, we're going to be looking at Colossians 2:6–15. This is part of a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to a group of Christians in the city of Colossae. Let's start by reading the first two verses:

⁶ 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.¹

In the first two verses of this passage, Paul tells the Colossians to walk in Christ as they have received him. “Received” is a technical term that refers to receiving the teachings of Christ. The Colossians have heard about Jesus and they have believed in him. So, Paul tells them to continue to follow Jesus as their Lord. They are supposed to be rooted in him and built up in him, as they are established in the faith, just as they were taught. This kind of life should result in an abundance of thanksgiving.

This passage teaches us something very important about Christianity. It shows us that making a commitment to Jesus, professing faith in him, is merely the beginning of a relationship with God. Real faith, or trust, in Jesus is not one moment in your life. Real faith, the kind that unites you to Jesus and puts you into a right relationship with God, is a lifelong thing. We need to continue in our faith and live as though Jesus is the Lord of our lives. Jesus should be our King, our Master, the one who “commands our destiny” as we just sang.² When Paul says, “built up in him,” he implies that we are a work in progress. We are supposed to grow into what God wants us to be as his children.

These two verses alone also show that salvation should lead to thanksgiving. Christians, we should be thankful that God has saved us out of a dark future of condemnation and a bleak present of a meaningless, hopeless life. As Paul says in Colossians 1:13–14,

¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

And this passage touches on a very important theme that runs through the whole Bible. It is the theme of the temple. The church is God's temple. We are supposed to be the “place” where God dwells on earth, where God is worshiped, and where the forgiveness of sins can be found. I

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² These words come from the hymn “In Christ Alone.”

think that's why later Paul says that we—together, as the body of Christ, as the temple of the living God—have been filled by and in Jesus. Our purpose is to glorify God by worshiping him in all areas of our lives. And our lives should be marked by thanksgiving as we respond to the gospel of grace. We who were once dead have been made alive in Christ. We are now his servants and he is our Master. For that reason, we shouldn't let anything else take us captive.

That is why Paul warns the Colossians not to be taken captive by any other philosophies. Let's read verse 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." If we are to stay rooted in Christ, we must avoid all other empty, deceitful, rival philosophies. Paul doesn't condemn all philosophy. After all, the word simply means "love of wisdom." Paul has just told us in verse 3 that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ. The kind of philosophy that Paul warns about is the philosophy *according* to human tradition, *according* to the elemental spirits of the world, and *not according* to Christ. The key is that these philosophies are described as "empty deceit." They are empty because they cannot fill us up the way that Jesus does. And they are deceitful because they are not true.

We know that there are a lot of manmade philosophies out there. And these philosophies are godless ones, such as naturalism, the view that there is no God or anything supernatural, or scientism, that all of reality can be explained through science. These are essentially worldviews in which God does not exist, and all can be explained by science or by human reasoning. In Colossae, the "empty philosophy" might have combined Jewish regulations, such as dietary laws and circumcision, with mysticism and a form of asceticism. If you look at the next passage in Colossians, verses 16–23, you can see that. The Roman Empire was full of many different religions, and there might have been a temptation for these Christians in Colossae (a city in what is now known as Turkey) to add other religions or philosophies to Jesus. Certain people in Colossae might have believed that these things were necessary in order to have a right standing with God. But Paul says that the Colossians need nothing other than Christ.

It's a little harder to know what Paul means when he writes about philosophies according to "the elemental spirits of the world." The "elemental spirits" can either mean the physical elements of this world, such as air, earth, fire, and water. They can also mean spiritual beings like demons. Perhaps the best way to understand this phrase is to see it as both. Unbelievers worship the creation instead of the Creator. These "elemental spirits" somehow represent idols,

or rivals to God. Paul could have meant that these “elemental spirits,” or “elemental principles,” were being taught by some false teachers. Ultimately, false teaching and false religious practices are rooted in the demonic realm. They belong to Satan, the father of all lies (John 8:44).

In our day, many empty and deceitful philosophies try to usurp the throne of Christ. Any form of idolatry is a rival to Christ as Lord. Obsession with romance, wealth, fitness, or politics can prove to be an empty philosophy.

There are many false teachings that creep into the church, like the postmodern thought that no one religion can be true, or that all religions lead to the same place, or that everyone is saved and there is no hell. There are other false teachings that become popular, such as New Age teachings. The specifics come and go, but they all tend to do with finding spiritual healing and peace outside of Jesus. And there are many false teachings that attempt to say that Christianity is false. I like to call this “Dan Brown history.” You know the story: there were many competing Gospels, and the Church decided which Gospels to keep and which ones to cover up.

I realize that there are many people who don’t regard themselves as religious, or who don’t think they have become captive to any philosophy or ideology. I think all of us are religious. We all think something is ultimate, and that something doesn’t require any other explanation. That something tends to be our god. And people seem to do a lot of irrational things.

This week I heard about a man named Braco the Gazer. He’s a Croatian man who appears to thousands of people and just gazes at them for several minutes. He doesn’t speak. He doesn’t stare. He just sincerely gazes. And people claim that his gaze gives them feelings of love and light and energy and heat, and that his gaze can even bring healing.

Perhaps such things have a kind of placebo effect. But they don’t unite us to God. They don’t make us right with him or give us eternal life. That’s why we need to reject all of these false teachings. Christianity is a true view of all of reality. Christians need to develop a Christian worldview that tells us that the purpose of life is to glorify God; all truth comes from God; the problem of the world is sin; and the only solution is Jesus. We need to guard our doctrine and the doctrine of our churches.

Sadly, I have seen many examples of people leaving their Christian roots because of empty philosophies. I have a friend whom I met in Austin when I was a graduate student at the University of Texas. We met at the church that I was attending and eventually joined. I was studying voice at the university and he was a singer, too. Thought he had a day job working in a

government office, he wanted to be a Christian R&B singer. He had even recorded an album. We became friends and occasionally had lunch together. We would talk about life and music.

From what I knew of this man when I lived in Austin, he was a godly man. He had a wife and three daughters, and it seemed to me that he wanted to use his musical abilities to serve the Lord. It was only after I left Austin that I noticed a change. The next time I came back to visit, I had lunch with this man. He started to tell me how he had been doing some “research” on the Internet. He told me there were other Gospels, like the Gospel of Thomas. He told me other religions featured a virgin birth and a resurrection. I wasn’t very familiar with these things at the time, but now I know that there is a lot of bad history out there. The other Gospels were written in the second century or later. For example, the Gospel of Thomas was written towards the end of the second century. Thomas certainly did not write it. The same is true for the Gospel of Judas and other false gospels.

At any rate, this man was reading this inaccurate history and he was starting to doubt his faith. On my next trip to Austin, I once again had lunch with this man. He told me he was starting to look into Judaism. After all, if he couldn’t trust Christianity, he might as well go back to the roots of Christianity.

The last time I saw this man, he said he was just trying to live his life. He said he meditated on Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He told me he realized he needed to work on loving himself better. He also hinted at having some desire for contact with men. His comments were very ambiguous, but I could tell he had struggled with same-sex attraction.

This was the last time I saw him, but every few months, we would talk on the phone. Eventually, he told me some big news. He had decided to leave his wife. He had also tried out homosexuality. Though he had sex with a man, he didn’t know if he wanted to pursue being gay. He was obviously very mixed up. The last time I talked to him, he told me he was doing naked yoga and he was still trying to sort out his sexual orientation. From the looks of his Facebook profile, he is involved in some group that makes sexual pleasure their religion.

That’s just one example of someone I know who has left the faith. Another, closer friend I had seemed to be a strong Christian. But something has happened in her life, and I’m not sure what. All I know is that she divorced her husband and is now exploring astrology.

Now, you don't have to get caught up in strange things to be taken captive by an empty, deceitful philosophy. People leave the faith in order to pursue desires, relationships, careers, or simply because they don't want Jesus to be Lord over their lives.

We must guard our hearts, guard our doctrine, and even guard each other so that we can continue to stay rooted in Christ. We don't need any other philosophies, because all true wisdom is found in Christ. And he is the only one who can save us.

If we are to stay rooted in Christ, we need to remember the gospel message. That means we must continue worshiping, reading the Bible, and even preaching the gospel to ourselves. We must remember that in Christ, we have access to the fullness of God. If we are in Christ, our old self has died. If we are in Christ, we are risen to new life. If we are in Christ, we have forgiveness of sins. And if we are in Christ, our enemies have been defeated.

Let's read verses 9–15:

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. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Verses 9–15 summarize the key elements of the gospel message. In Christ, we have access to the fullness of God. In verses 9 and 10, Paul reminds us once again that the fullness of God dwells in the physical body of Christ. “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.” Jesus is God, or, to put it more accurately, the God-man. And if we are united to Jesus, we have access to the fullness of God. Think about that: if the fullness of God dwells in Jesus, and we are “in Christ” through faith, we have direct access to all of God. If we are the body of Christ and he is the head of that body, we are connected to the one who is over all rulers and all authorities. If we are the temple, God's dwelling place on Earth is in us. Our Lord is the Lord of the universe. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. There is no greater power out there. Why would we want

to worship something else or pursue any other philosophy? In Christ, we have everything we need.

That doesn't mean we can't learn other things, like math and science and history. But we should learn those subjects knowing that math and science are possible because they reflect the orderliness of the mind of God and the order and design of his creation. All truth is God's truth. So, we should learn to connect all of life, including everything we learn, to God. We should learn to interpret every fact in light of the existence of God.

Beginning in verse 11, Paul gets to the heart of the gospel. In Christ, our old selves have died. Paul talks about this transformation that God performs in Christians by using the metaphor of circumcision. God told Abraham, the father of all the Israelites, that all of the men among God's covenant people had to be circumcised (Genesis 17). Literally, this was a surgery, a putting off of part of the flesh. But even in the Old Testament, circumcision took on a metaphorical quality. Israelites were told they needed to have circumcised hearts, which meant they needed to have new hearts, hearts changed by God (Deut. 10:12; 30:6; Jer. 4:4). We might say that to be right with God, we need to have spiritual heart surgery. That's because before that transformation, we don't desire or love rightly. Our problem is that we don't love God and other people the way we should. We don't desire to do what is noble and right, at least not all the time and not with the right motives.

Here, Paul says that all Christians have been "circumcised with a circumcision made without hands." In other words, God is the one who did this circumcision. God has performed this spiritual heart surgery on his people. It was done "by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ." The meaning of this is debated. Some people think the circumcision of Christ refers to his actual circumcision, which is a reminder that Jesus obeyed the law, the covenant demands of God. Paedobaptists—those who believe children of believers should be baptized while they are infants—believe that Christian baptism is the equivalent of circumcision, and this is what they baptize babies. However, the mention of faith in verse 12 shows why this view is wrong. Baptism apart from faith does nothing.

Other people think the circumcision of Christ is a way of referring to his death. When Jesus died, he was "cut off." Still others think that it refers to the spiritual circumcision that Christ performs on us. Even in the Old Testament, circumcision language was used for

regeneration, or being “born again.”³ God told the stubborn, rebellious people of Israel that they needed circumcised hearts and even ears (Jer. 6:10; Acts 7:51). To listen to God’s voice and respond to it rightly, we need to be transformed. We often think of the gospel as dealing with Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And that’s right. But part of the good news is also that God transforms us so that we can respond rightly to Jesus. He gives us the Holy Spirit.

I think the “circumcision of Christ” refers both to his death and to our regeneration. If we are united to Christ in faith, we participate in his death. This is very similar to what Paul writes in Romans 6:3–4. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

True circumcision is also described in Romans. Romans 2:28–29 says, “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.” To be circumcised by God is to have a radical heart surgery performed by God the Father, through the Son, by means of the Holy Spirit.

In Christ, we become spiritually alive. Not only do we die with Christ, but we rise with him, too. This dying and rising is represented in baptism, which is considered part of the complex of events—faith, repentance, receiving the Spirit—that marks our initiation into the family of God. The key element in verse 12 is faith in God’s ability to do powerful things. If God can raise Jesus from the grave, he can make us into new creations. This is very similar to what Paul writes in Ephesians 2. We once were dead in our sins and now we are alive in Christ.

In Christ, we have forgiveness of sins. Because of what Jesus did on the cross, by dying in our place, we have the forgiveness of sins. Our debt to God that stood over us with its legal demands was nailed to the cross. This reminds me of that verse in “It Is Well with My Soul.”

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!

³ For the role of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, even in the Old Testament, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Spirit: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006).

On the cross, Jesus paid our debt. We all have turned our backs on God. Sure, we may think of him when we have a need, but the rest of the time we don't think of him and love him as we should. We don't live life on his terms. Our lives are rooted in something else. God cannot have this, because our sin ruins his creation, and because he is a righteous, perfect judge. Yet Jesus lived the perfect life that we don't live—always rooted in God—and he died in our place, paying the penalty for our crimes against God. And his resurrection proves that his death paid that debt in full. Jesus took on the sentence for our crimes against God and walked out of the grave a free man, having satisfied the penalty for our sin.

Finally, Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven have accomplished one last, important thing. On the cross, God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." Ultimately, Jesus died because it was God's plan to save us through Jesus. But Jesus also died because Satan and the unbelieving Jewish leaders in Jerusalem wanted him eliminated. The devil and the Sanhedrin thought that they defeated Christ when he was crucified, but the irony is that through death, God defeated his enemies. When Jesus died, the authorities stripped him naked, paraded him in front of angry crowds, and celebrated their triumph over him. But Paul tells us the reality is quite different. Through Jesus' death and subsequent vindication, God stripped his enemies naked, paraded them in public, and celebrated his triumph over them. This may not be apparent to the world right now, but when Jesus returns, it will be.

Once again, we see that Jesus is Lord over all authorities and rulers, on earth and in heaven. If our root is in Christ, no enemy can defeat us. We must remember to preach this gospel message of regeneration and forgiveness and triumph to ourselves, to remember that we have everything we need in Christ. We need to do this in the midst of temptation or discouragement, to keep us from slipping away from Jesus.

Now that we've looked at the details of this passage, how should we respond?

Let me first ask this: what is your life rooted in? What is your life built on? If it's not truly built on Jesus, or on the one true, three-in-one God that is the Father, Son, and Spirit, it will be built on something else, something that isn't lasting.

If you haven't built your life on Jesus, I would urge you to do that. Other things may sound good. Other ideas, ways of life, or even religions may sound very attractive. But they either won't be true (in the case of other religions) or they won't put you in the right with God

(in the case of philosophies). Only Jesus can forgive our sins, change our hearts, and give us eternal life. But we must be rooted in Jesus. We can't plant Jesus into another root. It doesn't work that way. He won't be built on our lives. It's the other way around.

A lot of people have wrongly been taught that to become a Christian means saying a prayer, or making a one-time confession of faith. Now, we can and should pray to God when we come to faith, and we should confess that we believe that Jesus is Lord and God and that he died for our sins. But real faith isn't just saying words. Real faith is a living, continuing trust in Jesus. There are many false converts, people who once said they believed and were baptized and are not following Jesus. Let's not be fooled. Those people are not Christians. Anyone can say some words. Anyone can get wet. Anyone can appear to follow Jesus for a short time. But real Christians continue to follow Christ.

If you're not a Christian, or if you're not sure you're really a Christian, I would love to talk to you about what it means to follow Jesus.

If you are a Christian, how do we stay rooted in Christ?

There are some practical ways to help us stay rooted in Christ. We need to continue to read our Bibles. My goal is to read the entire Bible every year. I think it's a reasonable goal—though I've often failed. You can do it by reading twenty-three chapters each week, or a little over three chapters a day. We need to remember that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3). But there's no law saying you have to read in the Bible in one year. Try reading it over the course of two years. If you read two chapters a day, even if you miss a day here or there, you can read it two years' time. Staying in the Bible helps us remember what is true and what is valuable. It keeps us rooted in Christ.

We can also read other books that help us understand the Bible or help understand how to connect the Bible to every area of life. What's important is that we are careful about our inputs. You will only be as good as the diet your brain and your heart are getting. So, choose wisely.

Here's something I want you to think about. We have a limited amount of time, and we should be careful how we spend our time. Think only about reading. Tony Reinke, in his book on reading called *Lit!*, makes the following observations. There are currently eighteen million books in the Library of Congress. In fifty years, there will probably be at least twenty-eight million books. If in the next fifty years we read one book a week, which is a lot of reading, we could read 2,600 books. That sounds impressive. But that means that for every book we read, we

choose not to read ten thousand other books. We will only be able to read one out of every ten thousand books, and only if we read one book per week.¹ So choose your reading wisely. Don't waste all your time on the Internet, watching TV and movies, and reading bad books.

We can also stay rooted in Christ by worshiping him, particularly on the Lord's Day with other Christians. Remember that Paul said we should abound in thanksgiving. Be thankful that God saved you and show your thanks through prayer and through praise. Sing of how good God is and talk to him regularly.

Staying rooted in Christ means that we have to dig up weeds that would threaten us. Whether those weeds are sinful practices or distractions or philosophies, ideologies, or even other religious ideas, if they are contrary to Jesus, we need to root them out of our lives so that we can stay rooted in Christ.

Finally, remember the gospel. Remind yourself that you have sinned against the holy Creator and are deserving of eternal condemnation, and you have been saved by God's grace, which is available at great cost: Jesus' death on the cross. Preach the gospel to the people around you, whether it's your congregation, your Sunday school class, your family, or your friends. Never assume that they know the good news of Jesus Christ. And even if they know it, we never move past the gospel. We need to keep hearing it and thinking about it. It keeps us rooted in Christ.

When we continue in our faith, reject the world's deceitful philosophies, and remember the gospel, we stay rooted in Christ. If you do these things, when you die, someone will stand up at your funeral and say, "He stuck to his roots, no matter what."

¹ Tony Reinke, *Lit!* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 93–94.